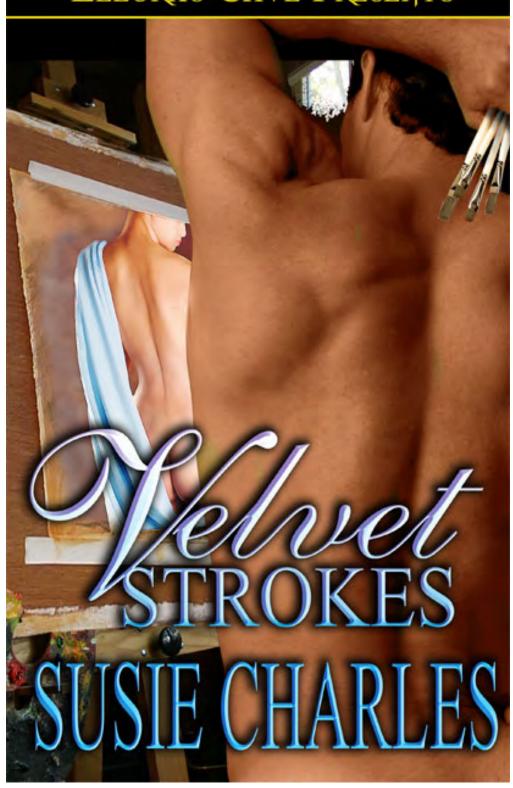
Ellora's Cave Presents



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Velvet Strokes

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VELVET STROKES

Susie Charles

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Chapter One

"What'll you have to drink, sunshine?"

Though the cavernous room was dark, Tom's head pounded in time with the flashing beat of the multicolored strobe lights. Blue, red, green—the pulsing colors shot like steel skewers through his blinking eyes. What had begun as a minor twinge over his right temple when he left his loft had developed into a full-blown, clenching vise of a headache by the time he reached the center of London.

He spun slowly to face the deep, male voice barking in his ear over the discordant thump of the most God-awful music he'd heard in years.

"Are you addressing me?"

"No, I'm speaking to the leprechaun on your shoulder, mate. What'll it be?"

A quick glance at the top shelf gave him enough information to realize that even purchasing a half-decent scotch was highly unlikely.

"Thanks, but I'll pass."

"Well then, if you're not drinking, or even thinking about drinking, move away from the bar."

"Why?" Moving away from the bar would require him to mingle in the sweating, heaving mass of humanity currently gyrating a few feet from the dubious but relative safety of the bar area. He'd come with one task in mind, and getting his body rubbed by some deviant with enough body piercings to pop rivet the Titanic, or have his butt pinched by a leather-clad Lothario in the mostly gay bar was not on his agenda—anywhere.

"Because you're standing there frowning, with a stick stuck up your cute, aristocratic ass, and you're scaring away the customers. That's why. So drink up, or shift it. *Capisce*?"

He gritted his teeth, struggling to maintain his calm under such direct provocation. "I'm here to see Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth who?"

"Elizabeth Burnett," he yelled, trying to make himself heard over the nonsensical, hyped-up jabbering of the DJ. "The owner?"

"Oh, you mean *Lizzy*?"

His lips firmed as he nodded.

"Yeah, well take a load off, sunshine. *Away* from the bar." He tossed his head in the direction of an outbreak of yahooing and catcalling ten feet away. "Your *Elizabeth* is gonna be a bit busy for a while by the looks of it."

Tom turned in the direction of the bartender's smug grin.

A stunning woman with long sable locks, wearing, from what he could ascertain, little more than a hot-pink satin bikini with a handkerchief masquerading as a skirt wrapped around her hips, was being hoisted, laughing, by four hulking brutes with shaved heads. Among the four of them they had enough tattoos, chains, piercings and leather to keep a fetish shop in business for a few months at least. Particularly disconcerting was the short but swarthy one dressed in little more than a leather jockstrap with suspenders going over his shoulders.

The crowd parted before them then surged back like a wave to fill in the gap created by their passing as they carried their precious, giggling cargo in the direction of the stage.

Music suddenly boomed from the speakers around the room. Some banal dance number had the many speakers—and his eardrums—vibrating and crackling from the intensity of the decibel output. At the risk of permanent damage to his cochlear

faculties, he watched in appalled fascination as the woman and her overgrown quartet of captors began a libidinous display of dancing that would do a pole dancer proud. Oblivious to the hooting, lewd encouragement from the crowd, his attention fixed solely on the lady.

Elizabeth.

Two years and she hadn't changed.

Full, heavy breasts scarcely contained in the shimmering, straining triangles of pink satin. Glistening skin highlighting a slender waist that flared into an incredibly feminine set of wide hips. Barely concealed by a silky swathe of fabric that made his mouth water as he recalled running his tongue over every inch of exposed flesh.

His groin tightened.

Arms over her head, a smile creasing her beautiful face, she shimmied between two men touching and stroking her, who looked like they could devour her on the spot.

His anger flared. How could she let them paw her like that? It was indecent.

Shameless.

Wanton.

Absolutely and totally erotic.

And it should have been for his eyes only.

The music, the crowd, the flashing lights faded away as he watched her, spellbound. Another night. Another place. Lit by candles, sultry music floating around them as he lay back on the cushions scattered on the floor in front of his fireplace. Watching as Elizabeth danced, just for him. Her eyes holding his captive as she discarded piece after piece of clothing until she swayed in front of him in time to the haunting beat, naked...beautiful, the lush curves and sensuous essence a work of art he could never truly capture...

But it wasn't just for him any longer.

The truth of that slammed into him as the present came rushing back in to dispel the memory.

In spite of the disapproving grunt from the bartender, he rested his back against the bar, folded his arms, and prepared to wait for as long as it took.

Five minutes...

Ten passed.

Fifteen...

God, were they going through the whole damn song list? He couldn't watch anymore. Jealousy sat heavy in his gut, a raw burn of possessiveness that seared his insides.

"Where's the office?" he called out to the now occupied bartender.

"See that exit sign over there?" He jerked his head slightly behind him and to the right. "Down the hallway, past the toilets."

"Thank you," he replied abruptly and turned.

"I'd be careful though, if I were you."

Tom paused mid-stride and turned back to the mocking expression of the barman. "Dare I ask why?"

"We got some none-too-fussy clientele here who would just love to snuggle up to your sweet ass, sunshine." He laughed at his own joke.

Let anyone try... Tom was less than amused but bit back the retort that sprang to his lips. "Please inform Elizabeth that I'm waiting to speak with her," he said instead, and moved in the direction of the office.

As he strode down the dimly lit hallway, he savored the small amount of relief brought on by the muting of the raucously blaring music. He averted his eyes from the couple fondling and kissing in the small, darkened alcove just before the toilets, hurrying past in the direction of the "office" sign lit up at the end.

Thrusting his hands in his pockets, he leaned against the locked door and closed his eyes with relief, the pounding in his head abating slightly. In some detached part of his mind, he noted that the music had settled down, the catcalling had eased off. Hopefully that was a good sign...

"Now, aren't you a pretty one, sweetheart?"

Tom's eyes snapped open as a finger stroked down the side of his face. A Goliath of a man wearing an open leather vest and a studded leather biker cap, stood in front of him, smiling.

"I'm not your *sweetheart*," he gritted out, "and if you want to leave with all your body parts intact, I suggest you remove your finger, and get f—"

"Harry! You naughty thing."

A laughing feminine voice cut him off. But it was sufficient for "Harry" to step back and turn to her instead. The woman, her diminutive height dwarfed by the hulking hormone in front of her, stepped up to him without any fear and poked him in the chest.

"I've just left poor Nigel. He's been looking all over for you."

"Nigel? Is looking for me?" A huge grin broke over his face before he swooped her off her feet to plant a smacking kiss on her cheek. "That's music to my ears. Thanks, Lizzy luv. You're a darling." And strode off.

Elizabeth, her face sweat-streaked, her breath still a little uneven from her exertions, turned to face him, the smile slipping into a frown as she considered him. "It isn't a good idea to tell any of the guys around here to 'fuck off', Tom. It's a gay club—they tend to get a bit literal." She raised an eyebrow at him but didn't speak further as she unlocked the door and led the way into the office, softly lit by a row of recessed lights above the solid red cedar desk. Half a dozen security monitors showing various views of the dance floor and bar were inset into the wall on the right.

He moved into the middle of the room, taking in the professionally equipped space in contrast to the decadent bacchanal outside. In the sudden, blessed quiet, the sound of the door clicking shut behind him had him turning around.

Leaning back against the door, Elizabeth considered him, her startling cornflower blue eyes running down and then back up his body, a tight smile on her face.

"Since it's highly unlikely you've changed your sexual orientation, I can only assume you're slumming. Why is that? What would bring the great Thomas Danville down to my little den of iniquity?"

He shrugged, as if the sight of her standing there practically naked had no effect on him. It did though. And was the reason he kept his hands in his pockets, fighting the urge to reach out to her. He knew it would be less than well received. "A proposition."

"Oh, well this should be interesting." She didn't move from her spot, leaning against her hands on the door. He could only dream that she fought the same need to touch him. Dream was right...

"Is this what you wanted, Elizabeth? This...this life?" He glanced at the monitors.

"What do you mean 'this life'? I run a very successful club, Tom. 'This life' as you put it, has been good to me."

"I can see. Surrounded by deviates. Letting them paw at you, putting their hands all over you. You left me for this?" One of his hands left its pocket to wave at the monitors.

After a brief flare, her eyes shuttered, going blank, emotionless. "It's *my* life, Tom. And, therefore, none of *your* business," she snapped and pushed off the door.

Glancing down, he noticed red finger marks on the pale, creamy flesh of her arms, her waist, and became infuriated, knowing where they had come from.

"You don't have to do this. I could have given you better, Elizabeth. I offered -"

A sharp, mocking laugh left her lips. "Offered me what? A position as your mistress? A nice, cozy little apartment where you could visit me when it suited you?"

"That's rubbish! It wasn't like that—"

She spun on her heel, no more than an arm's length away and held up her hand, cutting him off, anger pouring off her in waves. Her words though, when she spoke, were controlled, so cool as to be almost icy. "What is it you want, Tom? I have a club to run, in case you hadn't noticed."

Great, he was managing to alienate her without even trying. And that was the very last thing he wanted to do. "Fine. Let's get back to business then. I need you, Elizabeth. For a special job."

"Yes, well, I hardly expected it to be for anything else. Sorry, I don't do artist's modeling anymore. For you or anyone else."

She turned to walk away, but he grabbed her arm and turned her to face him, anger beginning to simmer in his head along with the headache that had returned with a vengeance.

"You were never just a model to me, Elizabeth." He eased his grip slightly but didn't release her, awareness of the warmth of the skin under his palms filtering through him. Soft too, the skin smooth and silky. "And you damn well know it."

"So true, I was the little bit of fluff you liked to amuse yourself with. The naughty little secret your family wasn't to know about."

"Elizabeth —"

"Look, Tom, whatever it is, I'm not—"

"No. Hear me out. Please. Just hear me out."

"Fine. You have two minutes. Talk fast."

"You recall the 'Aphrodisia'?" he asked.

The "Aphrodisia"? As if she could ever forget. With one word he managed to shatter her calm. Buried pain from the past crept under her guard, the small stab going straight for her heart.

The series of three highly sensual paintings had been the start of "them" — a catalyst for two years of uncontrollable hunger and passion that fed his artistic genius but nearly consumed them both...that nearly destroyed her. The past two years, since it all fell apart that winter's day, had been spent picking up the pieces and trying to rebuild her life.

"As you know, the Blonheim Foundation holds the original series," he said.

"They've commissioned another set, a companion to the first three."

In spite of the unaffected air she assumed, in her mind Elizabeth gasped. The Blonheim Foundation rarely, if ever, requested works done specifically for them. And they only took the best—their gallery was full of masters, old and new. Tom had taken her to watch as "Aphrodisia" was mounted there, prior to the public viewing. For a specific request to come from them... She could understand what this meant to his career. It was on a par with a scientist being awarded the Nobel Prize. A pinnacle few achieved in their lifetime.

She glanced pointedly down at his hand on her arm until he dropped it. "Why me? Can't you find some other starving model to sit for you?"

"They want the original model. *I* want the original model, Elizabeth. I wouldn't do it without you."

She had to wonder why not, since, judging from reports in the press, he and his career seemed to have managed quite well without her—his *muse*—for the past two years. "How very touching. But as I said, I don't model anymore, Tom. No need. I'm a successful businesswoman now." She waved her arm at the office, the monitors, amazed at how easily the lie fell from her lips.

"Please consider it, Elizabeth. You'll be paid well."

Pain sliced through her and she turned away before he could read it in her eyes. Why did it always come down to this, as if it was the crux of their relationship—he who had plenty and she who had none. "You never did get it, did you, Tom? For me it never was about the money."

God, how could he do this to her so easily? She inhaled deeply, bolstering her resolve. She'd known two years ago, in spite of the hurt, there would never be another man for her. Sometimes she wondered if the loneliness, the hunger for him that ate away at her would ever go away.

"Elizabeth..."

Strong hands caressed her shoulders, turning her back to face him. Looking into those dark, intent eyes, so close she could see the golden flecks in the iris, was like falling into the past, to a time when nothing mattered but the heat, the need, sating the unquenchable hunger that burned between them. She struggled against his grip.

"It was never, ever about the money, Elizabeth," he bit out in seeming exasperation, his tone gentling, "for either of us." Her heart stuttered as those hands slid up over the curve of her shoulders, her neck, to cup her face. Transfixed, her pulse skittering wildly, she watched as his head lowered, inch by inch, so close that his warm breath fluttered over her lips. "It was only ever...about this..."

A flicker of panic flared as she realized he was going to kiss her. Then it was lost, swamped under the feel of his warm lips closing over hers, his hands tilting her head so that the fit of their mouths was perfect. The achingly familiar caress that always left her yearning for more, crazy to touch him, taste him.

Her mouth opened on a gasp as his tongue licked, nudged. Stealing between her parted lips as a groan rumbled up his chest and restraint was tossed aside as he thrust deep. His hands freed her head, slipping lower to wrap around her and pull her against him as he ate at her mouth with a fierceness that sent her senses reeling.

Hard. Everywhere her body touched his felt hot and hard. The noticeable bulge in his groin that made her clit throb with unfulfilled need as it pressed up against her, rubbing the ultrasensitive button as their hips rocked together in a familiar dance. Liquid heat flowed through her to dampen the flimsy barrier of her panties.

Tasting him. After so long without. With a muffled whimper, she sank into the kiss as though the intervening years had never been. And in a heartbeat, the memories she'd

tried so hard to bury surged to the fore, supplanted by a new reality as her tongue curled around his, rubbed up against it in a primal form of mating that set her heart pounding and made her knees weak. The electric sensation that streaked through her from even that simple touch made her arch into him.

In a dizzying rush, her feet left the ground. Hands under her buttocks lifted her, the smooth wood of her desk cooling her flesh as she was perched on the edge. Strong male legs parting hers, stepping into the space formed as hers shifted, wrapping around his hips, his erection rubbing against her burning pussy.

So good. It felt so damned good.

Her hand moved down to grasp a tight buttock, pulling him closer. She needed more. Needed to feel him moving inside her, thrusting into her.

As if he shared her thoughts, the kiss deepened, became wilder. His mouth ate at hers with a hunger she matched. Voracious. Insatiable.

All that mattered was his lips on hers. Her body aching for his, for the pleasure she knew could be found there. A pleasure she hadn't known in such a long time.

Moans filled the air – his, hers – she didn't know. She no longer cared.

Her pussy clenched, her clit tingling, preparing for the climax that built faster and faster. Close. The tremors building, her muscles tightening in anticipation.

Until a warm hand slipped under the scrap of silk covering her breast, rubbing the nipple between thumb and finger before pinching it, sending a small frisson of erotic pain arcing through her body directly to her throbbing clit. She gasped, the shock finally jolting her out of the sensual haze fogging her senses.

Even though her body screamed for release, she tore her mouth from his, slipping her hand from around his neck to push him away.

"No!"

Both of them were breathing roughly, Tom's heaving chest rising and falling as he sucked in deep draughts. He stared at her, his eyes dark, heavy, full of the same desire, the same thirst for more that she knew hers must mirror.

She wrenched her gaze away, down, traveling over his body, unable to stop her eyes from moving lower. His cock bulged and strained against the zipper of his designer slacks, a telltale dampness that could only have been from her staining the light gray front where their bodies had met.

Mortified, she considered what she must look like, seeing herself as he would—perched on the edge of her desk, hair disheveled, lips swollen, her legs splayed shamelessly. Part of her bikini top nudged to the side so that a reddened nipple was bared, the tip peaked in wanton display.

God, she must look like a whore.

And that was a little too close for comfort.

Tears gathered, but were tamped down with a deep shuddering breath as she tugged at her top to straighten it. The feeble attempt at restoring her modesty didn't help calm the emotions rioting through her body. The last couple of years of steeling herself against her body's response to this man, all destroyed with one kiss.

With as much dignity as she could muster, she closed her legs and slid off the desk. Her footing wasn't sure, her legs were like water, and she stumbled in the four-inch heels. Tom reached for her, but before he could touch her, she held up her hand.

"Don't...touch me." If he did, she'd be lost. All it ever took was one touch. "Please leave, Tom."

"Elizabeth. No."

Steeling herself, straightening her back, she looked up at him, unable to miss the raging lust—barely concealed by a look of concern—that still darkened his eyes.

"I can't do this, Tom. Not again."

"And if I promise not to touch you?"

Even now he looked like a tiger about to pounce, the tension on his face, through his body, indication enough that he was only just restraining himself. "You're kidding me, right? We haven't seen each other for two years, and in two minutes—less—look what happened."

His jawline firmed and he took a step back, thrusting his hands into his pockets as he dropped his head, breaking the connection of their eyes. "If you agree, we wouldn't be alone."

This time the pain shafted a little deeper, nipping at her soul. Of course. How naïve of her to think she, the muse, wouldn't have been replaced after all this time. "Oh, I see."

But as if he could read her mind, translate the straighter stance, the squaring of her shoulders, into what she was thinking, he reached for her, clutching her hand in a reassuring grip. "It's not what you're thinking, Elizabeth," he offered, and she caught the small flash of dismay in his eyes. "Do you honestly think I'd be so crass?"

"Well then, what?"

He let her hand go, turning away as if to consider his words. When he turned back to her, his expression was neutral, blank. "They've requested a couple this time—a woman and a man. An evolution of the original series."

Taking the half-dozen steps to her chair, she sank into it gratefully, before looking up at him. "And who did you have in mind?"

"Richard."

Her body softened in the chair, some of the tension draining away as a small, weak laugh broke free.

"Richard? That figures. Funny, he didn't mention it last week..."

"Where did you see Richard? And why?"

She looked up at the scowl in his voice, seeing a matching expression on his face.

"Richard and I meet for coffee or a drink every now and then. Unlike some Danvilles," she flashed a brief, pointed look up at Tom, "he doesn't have a problem being seen with me in public. But then he never has much cared about what your family and friends think."

No, Richard was the black sheep of the Danville family, a role he relished. After spending ten years in an "acceptable" career in the SAS, he'd resigned his commission and nowadays spent most of his time freelancing as a fitness trainer. Ninety percent of his clients were female, which, she was sure, had a whole lot to do with him having a body that could tempt a saint to sin and a smile capable of melting half the polar ice cap when he turned on the charm. He was a six-foot-two stick of dynamite who had women falling over themselves for a chance to light his fuse. And though they'd kissed once or twice, succumbing to an attraction they both felt, for some reason they'd each pulled back, never taking it further. As if some invisible barrier stopped them.

She tapped her nail on the large blotter on her desk, her mind turning over. At least with Richard there, there'd be a buffer of sorts. "What would you need?" And why on earth was she even considering it? Curiosity? A perverse sense of masochism?

No, she knew why. In spite of what had happened between them, she had loved modeling for Tom. It allowed a sensual, decadent side of herself free, one that rarely saw the light of day lately, even in spite of her choice of occupation. It was the difference between business and pleasure. Not to mention knowing that she was someone's artistic inspiration had always been a heady thought.

"Two weeks. If you could get away from here. I need you full-time. You know how I work."

"How could I forget?"

When he was working, Tom was like a man possessed. Day or night lost all meaning—when the creative urge hit, he had to paint.

To think she'd lived that crazy life for the two years after she moved in with him. But then, she thought with a wrench, they'd mostly been happy days. Days filled with laughter, love, long nights when he wasn't working lying in each other's arms, gazing up through the skylight after making love. Or fucking on the rug, on kitchen counters, in the hallway...anywhere, anytime the urge took them...

She shook her head to shake off the memories as Tom spoke.

"I'd start with the preliminary sketches of you—Richard's are just about done—then you two together, working out the poses until I find the right three. Then I can get down to it."

His response was so brusque, so businesslike and unemotional, that she wondered if it would be possible after all. "I'll think about it. When would you need an answer?"

"Soon, Elizabeth. Blonheim's next exhibition is nine months away, and they want them for that."

Could she do it? Could she be around Tom and not want to touch him? Not want him to touch her?

His next words brought her back to earth with a thump.

"Since this is a purely business proposition, I'm offering you a quarter of what I'm being paid, Elizabeth. It will be very generous."

Money again. Well that took care of any delusions she might have had that he was trying to worm his way back into her life. But it was just as well, since with her current situation with the club and her finances, she could hardly afford to take a two-week "holiday".

"Naturally. But you realize I need to not only cover my own income, but also whoever I get in to manage things while I'm gone?"

"I said 'generous', Elizabeth. By that I mean it will be more than enough to pay off the loan you have on this place..." he looked around her office with a frown, the frown deepening when his gaze landed on the monitors, "and some left over besides."

A disconcerting thought started to work its way into her head. "And how do you know what I owe on this place?"

As she watched, waiting for his answer, he began to pace, not noticeably, but a random path around the office that allowed him to look anywhere but at her.

"The family has a seat on the board at the bank, currently filled by yours truly. I asked them to pull the details for me."

"You did what?" She stood, pushing her chair back so abruptly that it scraped across the linoleum. Anger boiled up inside her.

He stopped his pacing and stared back, his expression shuttered. "I know you've been struggling to make the payments the past four months. Not to mention the nursing home for your mother must be just about crippling you. You need this, Elizabeth."

Damn him! He knew then, all of it. Knew just how bad things were and she hated him having that leverage. "I don't need your stinking charity—"

He leaned over the desk at her, staring her down.

"It's not bloody charity. I just did my homework. That was a lesson *you* taught me, if you remember."

Oh, she remembered. She plopped back down in her seat. After he'd been shafted a couple of times by less than reputable agents in the early days and his career was faltering due to the industry backlash that washed over him, she'd taken it upon herself to show him how to find out about those he did business with. But he was right. She was having trouble making the loan repayments. Her mother's private nursing home care was just about killing her financially.

"Elizabeth, please. I didn't come here to fight with you. I need you."

And as much as it galled her to admit it to herself, she needed what he was offering, if what he said was true. She considered for a moment longer. Somehow she'd just have to keep it together. Two weeks. Surely she could manage that? And Richard would be there, so it wasn't as if they'd be alone...

"Okay. But I want a contract. Everything legal, on paper. I can be there in a week. That will give me time to get things organized here." "Sounds perfect," he said and gave her a tentative smile. "Deal?"

He held out his hand. After a short pause where she wondered if she'd really, finally, lost her mind, she took it, shaking it lightly.

"I'll see you in a week." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it, squeezing it once before letting go and turning for the door.

"And Tom?" He paused and half turned to face her. "This is probably unnecessary, but I'll state it anyway. I want the guest room. I'm not moving back into your bed."

His half-smile dropped and a cryptic look took its place. He nodded. "Understood." He left, closing the door softly behind him.

She let out breath. Hell, what had she just gotten herself into?

Chapter Two

"You're doing what?"

Elizabeth flinched as her sister's response rose a few decibels above comfort level following her announcement about the job for Tom.

"The man treats you like dirt, totally disses you so that his poor, precious family won't know he's been mixing it up with a lowly little barmaid, has a fling with some rich tart while he's meant to be with you, and you're going back for more?" Debbie's voice rose higher the angrier she became. "You're nuts! Totally bloody certifiable."

"You make it sound terrible. It wasn't *all* bad," glared Elizabeth, steeling herself against the venting she knew was coming. "And it wasn't a fling—it was only a date."

"A date? A flippin' date? Oh, right. I forgot. And he couldn't take you to hobnob with his rich society friends *why*? No, he had to take Lady Muck so *she* wouldn't embarrass him."

"He never said that, Deb! It was expected that he go with her. It was a family obligation he couldn't get out of. She was a second cousin, or something."

"And one his witch of a mother felt would be eminently suitable for the title of Lady Danville once *she's* pushing up daisies, I'll bet." Debbie shook her head. "I can't believe it. You're defending him. So you've forgotten the bit where he would only ever mention you to his family as his *model*, even though you'd been living together for two blasted years? God forbid they might think he was sullying his pecker with some little nobody. Hell, you loved him, Beth. He supposedly loved you."

"He did love me, Deb. In his way..." *Just not enough,* thought Elizabeth, looking away as she felt the tears welling.

"So why didn't he fight for you? You walked out and he just let you go. What kind of love—"

"He called, you know." She shot a quick look at Debbie, catching the surprise on her face. It was a fact Elizabeth hadn't shared with anybody, even her sister. But then she'd withdrawn at that time, using the setting up of the club as an excuse not to have to answer questions or face what had gone wrong. "Many times...just after..." Her words petered out as she recalled the desolation in his voice, slowly replaced by the brief, curt, almost resigned tone, the calls coming further apart before they finally stopped altogether.

"And?"

"I wouldn't return his calls. What was the point?"

"Well, it still doesn't make it right. Dammit, he hurt you!"

"I appreciate your concern, Deb. But I'm older now. Wiser. Stronger. And this time it's purely business."

"Oh, really?" Her sister's tone was laced with disbelief.

"He knows about Mom. He knows I've been having trouble making the loan repayments on the club."

"How? Is he having you investigated?"

"He's on the board at the bank, Deb. Plus, he's a Danville. Anything is possible. But darn it, I'm so close. Only six more payments and the last two years of struggling and scrimping will be behind me. As it is now, I stand to lose the lot. I'm on a limited extension already—three weeks left to catch up on the three payments I owe, plus the next one, or they foreclose. And if that happens, then what? Go back to being a barmaid? Long hours, on my feet all night, six nights a week for barely a subsistence income?" She hung her head in her hands. "Can't you see what this job would mean? I'd own the club. Mom's care would be taken care of."

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry." Debbie looked contrite. "I had no idea things were so bad. And I'm so sorry Jase and I can't help you out financially with Mom. But we're barely breaking even ourselves. Some months not even that. If we couldn't live here, rentfree... God, what a mess."

She held her sister's hand and squeezed it reassuringly. "I know, Deb. It's just the way things are. But at least you visit Mom regularly, make sure she's okay. Hell, I feel so bad that I never see her, but I'm either sleeping or working."

"Come on, Beth, don't be so hard on yourself. Visiting Mom is the least I can do to help. If you weren't paying for her care, she'd be stuck in a public home..."

They shared a glance. They'd both heard horror stories of patients relegated to the public nursing homes. It just wasn't an alternative either of them could contemplate.

Elizabeth stood, walking over to the wide bay window, pulling aside the lacy curtain to catch the struggling winter rays barely melting the frost off the ground. She let the curtain drop and turned back to her sister. "But you understand why I can't pass up this opportunity, don't you? I received the contracts from his solicitor today. Tom's being more than generous. Much more. It's like he said—the amount will pay out the rest of the loan, go a long way to covering the nursing home expenses, and still give me a small nest egg. And it's only two weeks."

"And once you've paid off the club, then what? Honey, you're not getting any younger. Don't you want to find someone nice to settle down with? You're hardly likely to find anyone at your place. I mean, let's face it, they're lovely guys, most of them, but you aren't exactly equipped to ring their chimes, if you know what I mean."

Elizabeth shrugged. "It's a living."

The phone rang in the kitchen and Debbie excused herself to answer it.

Flopping back in the thickly cushioned old sofa chair—one that Jase had saved from being tossed out at a estate sale he'd attended for his and Debbie's fledgling business, and then lovingly restored—Elizabeth took a long sip of her coffee as she looked around. Their old home. In spite of the differences her sister's deft decorating touch had made, it was still home. The one place on earth she felt like her old self. It was cozy, comfortable. Certainly a lot more homey than her Spartan apartment above the club. That was somewhere to put her head down at night and little more. But it brought Debbie's comment back to her.

Her sister was more right than she knew, and certainly more so than Elizabeth would let on. After two years, she was tired of the endless round of working afternoons and long nights. Crawling into a lonely bed in the wee hours of the morning. Sleeping until lunchtime. Then the same routine again. Day after day. Night after night. How the heck was she supposed to meet anyone?

Apart from her immediate financial concerns, it was a big part of why she'd accepted Tom's offer. A way off the crazy merry-go-round that never seemed to stop. Maybe when she'd paid off the loan, she could sell the club and make a reasonable profit. It was one of London's most popular clubs for the gay community, after all. And even after putting enough money aside to pay for her mother's nursing home for twelve months, there might be enough to just take off for a while. Move. Live somewhere else where nobody knew her. Perhaps even start over. *Doing what*? she wondered.

She closed her eyes and leaned back, savoring the brief respite before she had to leave for the club.

"That was Jase. The delivery from that last estate auction has been held up in traffic, so he'll be late home." Debbie sat down opposite her again, perched on the edge of the sofa. "So when do you leave to do your Lady Godiva thing?"

"In three days. Just enough time to finish showing Graham the ropes so that he can hold the fort while I'm gone. He should be okay, though—he's worked at the club since before I bought it, so there isn't much that happens there he doesn't know."

"Well, don't worry about Mom while you're gone. I'll tell her you love her—even if she can't even remember me most of the time. But promise to call me, Beth. Any time—day or night—if you need to talk. Okay?"

"Thanks, Debbie. I will."

Debbie slipped her glasses down her nose and smirked as she peered over the top of them. "And keep your hands off hottie Richard. The sight of that boy's naked tush would give a Carmelite nun an orgasm."

"Deb!" laughed Elizabeth, relieved the mood had lightened. "You told me you didn't sleep with him." It had been three years since Debbie and Richard had dated a few times, before he'd had to leave for active service in Iraq. By the time he returned, Jase had moved in. Strange how things worked...it was actually through that association she and Tom had met the first time.

"I didn't. More's the pity. We did get naked, though." Her expression became distant, a goofy smile tilting up her lips.

With a mischievous grin, Elizabeth grabbed a tissue and reached over to her sister.

"What are you doing?" At the feel of the tissue, Debbie batted Elizabeth's hand away from her face.

Motioning with the tissue-wrapped finger, Elizabeth pointed in the direction of her sister's chin. "Sorry, sis. It's just...the drool. I thought I'd catch it before it ran off your chin."

Debbie scowled and brushed absently at her mouth. "Oh, har, har. Don't be ridiculous. Anyway, that was years ago. Richard's probably all saggy now."

Elizabeth shook her head. "Ah, nope. Not saggy. Far from it, actually. About as far as it's possible to get..." Elizabeth sighed and covered her smug grin with her coffee mug.

"And how would you know, missy?"

"We see each other now and then." Elizabeth smiled at Debbie's drop-jaw look. "And boy, oh boy, what that man can do to a pair of jeans...or for that matter, leather..." She sighed dramatically, earning her a thwack on the knee with a folded newspaper from her sister.

"Bitch!"

She batted her eyelashes innocently at her sister. "But you have Jase, Deb. He looks pretty good in denim too..."

"True." Debbie nodded, and sat back, a wicked smile creeping across her face, her eyes twinkling. "Actually he looks *much* better out of it."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and held up her hand. "Okay. Enough. TMI." Elizabeth put her cup down and stood. "I would like to be able to look my brother-in-law in the face in the future without blushing, thank you very much. Anyway, I need to get going. I'll call you before I leave town." She leaned down to kiss her sister's cheek.

"And during," reminded Debbie. "I want to know you're all right. Or I'll just have to come up there and make certain for myself."

"Sure, sure. You're just looking for an excuse to catch another look at Richard in the buff."

"Not true!" cried Debbie indignantly. At Elizabeth's raised eyebrow, she blushed and grinned. "Well, maybe just a little look..."

* * * * *

"Sit still, Richard! Christ, you're worse than a two-year-old." Tom sighed in resignation and put down his sketchpad and pencil. "Ah, what the hell, let's take a break."

"About bloody time." Forsaking his reclining pose on the velvet-covered antique chaise lounge, Richard swung his legs over the side and stood, stretching, feeling the knots in his spine from maintaining the pose for so long pop and release. He moaned his relief. "Nice couch, by the way. Where the heck did you find it?"

"Would you believe Aunt Hermione's attic? I asked her if I could borrow it for a bit."

Richard's eyes widened and he choked down a laugh. "And you didn't tell her to what purpose it would be put, naturally."

Tom snorted. "No. Definitely not."

"I daresay this will be the first time in its illustrious history it's cradled naked bodies."

"It's been in Hermione's family for generations." Tom turned a wry look on Richard. "You need ask?"

"And now it will be the scene of my greatest moment." Richard gave a hearty sigh, hand clutched at his heart. "Elizabeth and me. Naked and frolicking on the crushed velvet, oblivious to the pained exclamations of the 'Creative One' as he implores us to 'hold that pose'. Oh, be still my beating heart!"

Tom laughed. "Give it up, you wanker." He picked up his sketchpad and pencil, preparing to put them on his desk, when he paused and turned. "By the way...how long have you been seeing Elizabeth?" He swiped Richard's jeans off the floor and tossed them to him.

"Since you two split up." Richard hopped on one leg then the other as he stepped into his jeans and pulled them up. "Why? Jealous?" He snapped the stud closed, watching Tom closely under his lashes.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Of course. How silly of me." Still observing Tom discreetly while he pulled his T-shirt over his head, he noticed the pensive look on his cousin's face. But rather than ask, he waited, knowing his naturally reticent cousin would spit out whatever was on his mind—eventually.

Tom straightened the pencils, lining them up in a row, so that all the ends were level, fussing until they were perfectly even—a nervous trait of his cousin's Richard was very familiar with. "So what do you two talk about?" asked Tom.

"Oh, just...stuff. You know, her work, my work, my family, my love life...her love life..." Behind Tom's back he grinned at the rigidity that entered his cousin's tall frame at that. "You know. Stuff."

No way was he letting Tom off easily this time. The damn fool had lost the best thing in his life when he let Elizabeth go. It was about time he realized it.

"Does she ever...mention me?"

Bingo!

"In what way?" he asked innocently.

Tom headed toward the kitchen. Richard snagged his boots and socks and followed him.

"Never mind. It doesn't matter, anyway. It's better left as is."

Good God, the man was a bloody moron.

"You're a smart man, Tom. Smarter than I'll ever be. But when it comes to women, and Elizabeth in particular, you suck."

Tom put down the beer he was pouring and glared at Richard, anger flaring in his eyes. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

Richard grabbed the glass of beer, took a long gulp and sighed, feeling the chill all the way down. "If you need to ask, then my man, you do need help. Seriously."

"Might I remind you that *she* left *me*?"

"Oh, I remember. That and a whole lot more, and you fucked up. And like everything you do, you did a damn good job of it. I'll bet you haven't even figured out the reason she left you, have you?"

"She told me she didn't want to model anymore. She wanted a 'normal' life." He scowled as he resumed filling the second glass and took a long drink. "Right. So she buys a rundown club in Earl's Court and becomes the unofficial queen—no pun intended—of the gay club scene. How blasted 'normal' is that?"

Richard shook his head in exasperation, and made a noise like a buzzer on a game show. "Wrrrrroong. As I said, you suck." He could hardly miss his cousin's perplexed frown. "Look. Think about those days, Tom. From Elizabeth's side, this time. Because you're missing the most important part." He rolled his eyes at the look of confusion on his cousin's face. "Here's a clue. Think back to what directly preceded Elizabeth leaving that day. Remember, you had a couple of visitors. Family, to be precise." Richard curled his lip in distaste. He'd been unfortunate enough to call in himself and caught the tail

end of his aunt's visit. The interfering old biddy. "By the way, how is Aunt Caroline? Still trying to fix you up with half the eligible socialites in London?" When Tom continued to look at him blankly, he shook his head and reached down for his leather jacket, slipping his arms inside before braving the early winter chill outside. "Just think about it, Tom. All the answers you seek are right there—you just have to look hard enough." He glanced at his watch and cursed softly, tossing back the rest of his beer. "Look, I have to go. Got a date with a little lady I really don't want to keep waiting. She's hot for my gorgeous bod, you know?" He winked at Tom.

Tom turned a dry glance on him. "I've always felt your modesty was your best feature, actually."

Richard chuckled. "I'll be back in a week. Try not to piss off Elizabeth in the meantime. Be good and play nice."

* * * * *

That night, glass of Merlot in hand, Tom sat back on the sofa in front of the fire, staring into the flames as he mentally flicked back through the memories to those last days with Elizabeth. It wasn't a place he visited very often, mainly because of the pain that went with it. Never in his life had he felt as desolate, as devastated, as he did watching Elizabeth walk out that door. It was as if all the brightness, all the life was sucked out the door with her, and he was left with a dark, empty space.

The weeks that followed had been some of the bleakest of his life.

It was not a time he particularly wanted to revisit, but perhaps it was time. And if it held the key to losing Elizabeth...

Slouching down into a comfortable position, he straightened his legs out in front of him, cursing softly as his big toe kicked the leg of the coffee table. He looked down, his eyes resting not on his throbbing toe, but on the drawer underneath the coffee table that had been nudged open a crack. His lips firmed. Placing his wineglass on the table, he reached for the drawer, opening it to extract the heavy album that lay inside.

His fingers over the hand-tooled leather cover of the photo album on his lap, tracing the indentations of the lettering. It had been one of Elizabeth's hobbies. Documenting their lives. His showings. His "great career". It had sat in the drawer under the glass-topped coffee table since the day she left. Not once had he looked at it.

The leather creaked, a slightly musty smell tickling his nose as he flipped open the cover.

Early days.

Shots of him in his studio—looking up with a paintbrush in his mouth, palette in hand, a startled look in his eye as Elizabeth caught him unawares. Or totally focused on whatever painting he'd been working on, oblivious even to her snapping him, a frown of concentration creasing his brow.

Family shots—Richard and him at Christmas at his parents', deep in conversation, glasses of wine in hand...

At his sister's wedding. His arm around his cousin Ann's shoulder. He chuckled as he recalled Richard taking the shot. The damn fool had backed up to get a better angle and had nearly fallen into the lake behind him...

The gallery opening for his "Insatiable" series. The shot with his mother and father he particularly recalled. Both of them standing stiffly beside him. While they supported his artistic endeavors, it was no secret, on his mother's part at least, that they wished he'd pursue something a little more "acceptable" than nudes, however artistically rendered. Landscapes, for instance.

He was halfway through the album before he found one of Elizabeth. He smiled fondly as the memory came back. Elizabeth had been posing for hours. He'd lost track of time, so absorbed as usual. Long after midnight, he realized she'd fallen asleep. Curled up on the floor like a kitten, the sheet she'd been draped in tucked up under her chin, she'd looked so beautiful, so innocent, he couldn't resist snapping her before he carried her to bed.

He flipped the page and found, it occurred to him with some consternation, one of the few photos of them together—her sister's wedding, this time. Elizabeth smiling as she looked up at him, his arms wrapped around her, the summer sunlight filtering through the weeping willow in the garden of the reception grounds kissing them with a mottled golden glow. He traced his finger over the photo, following the line of her hair as it tumbled down her back... When she'd looked at him like that, her eyes brimming with love, he would have done just about anything she asked of him.

Happy days.

The smile faded as a disconcerting realization began to filter in, casting a shadow over the happiness from those memories.

Page after page. Flipping further through the album, a sickening understanding settled over him.

It was the final photo of Elizabeth, though, less than a month before she left, he recalled, that hit him the hardest. He even remembered taking the damn photo. He'd spent an hour shooting her in preparation for a private commission. She'd been tired, he'd been frazzled because he couldn't get the pose and angle he wanted with the light just so, and had stomped away to get them both a coffee. When he returned, she'd been standing at the window, sheet wrapped around her, light angled onto her face, the expression exactly what he'd been trying to achieve all afternoon. In his excitement, he'd almost dropped the coffees in his rush to grab up the camera and capture it. What he hadn't realized, hadn't seen at the time, was that the sad look in her eyes hadn't been a pose. It was the look of someone who was truly hurting. But it was the unspoken plea in her blue eyes, the hurt and sadness he could only now read there, now that he opened his eyes fully and truly saw, that brought him undone.

His throat tightened. His eyes burned as the honest pain she'd been feeling back then hit him in the heart. Why hadn't he *seen* it? He was trained to pick up things others didn't. Could he really have been so blind to what was in her head…her heart?

He snapped the album shut and closed his eyes, willing away the dampness that had built behind his clenched lids as he breathed deeply, fighting the tightness in his chest.

The feeling passed, slowly, and he opened his eyes again, glancing down at the album before tucking it back into the drawer and pushing it closed with his foot. He tipped the last of the Merlot into his glass and held the ruby liquid up to the flame before upending the glass and swallowing the wine in one large gulp, feeling the quick burn as it raced down over the lump in his throat.

He let his mind wander. Fragments of memories, not just from that last day, but weeks and months before filtered in. Memories, seemingly unrelated at the time, but what amounted to a screw-up of truly monumental proportions.

As a documentary of their life together, the album was a damning indictment against him as the world's biggest, most insensitive fool. Photos of him, of Elizabeth, even a few of them together, taken by other people—Richard, her sister, friends of Elizabeth's they'd visited. But never any of her with *his* family. At all the Danville family gatherings, not a single one. As if that was a part of his life—for two years—she hadn't been privy to. To his great shame, he couldn't even remember if he'd invited her to any of them. Where she'd gotten the photos from, he didn't know. Richard seemed most likely, since he was the only one of his family who knew of and understood his *real* relationship with Elizabeth. Mortification hit him hard at just how badly he'd treated her, to what extent he had taken her for granted.

In every way that mattered to a woman, he'd denied her. He'd never doubted that she loved him. She'd shown it every day, in what she said, what she did. How she looked after him so that he could concentrate on his art.

His fucking *art*. His lip curled with disgust.

Why had that been more important than giving back to the woman he loved half of what she gave him? He'd been driven back then. Obsessed. A budding, enthusiastic

painter intent on rendering his visions of life as he saw it—his great, blasted masterpieces. Translating the beauty around him, the joy and love, the passion, but somehow missing the one thing, the one person who gave him that gift. Encouraged. Fostered it. The ability to see what others often missed, whose selfless gift of herself, her love...support, enabled him to unlock what he felt, saw, and bring a fraction of that passion to life under his brush.

But that final day...

His mother had arrived, unannounced as usual for one of her thankfully rare visits. Five minutes earlier and she would have found Elizabeth and him making love on the rug. As it was, he'd wandered out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his hips to find his mother interrogating a naked and very embarrassed Elizabeth.

That was bad enough, but he could hardly blame his mother for what had occurred after she left. He flinched at the memory, Elizabeth's words from the club making perfect sense...

"Offered me what? A position as your mistress? A nice, cozy little apartment where you could visit me when it suited you?"

Stupid. He placed his now empty glass on the table and held his head in his hands.

At the time it had seemed like the perfect solution—to him. Since he couldn't really move his studio, he'd had the brilliant idea to put Elizabeth up in an apartment nearby, close enough that he could spend the nights he wasn't working with her. Plus take her out of the line of fire of his mother's viperous tongue, and the rest of his family who disapproved of the "barmaid-model" who seemed to occupy so much of his time.

Instead of putting his damn obsession with his career, his paintings aside for however long it took, facing the whole bleeding lot of them and telling them he loved her and they could take the "good Danville name" and all go to hell, he had taken what he saw now was the easier path, thinking Elizabeth would understand. But he knew now she hadn't. And could he blame her? To make matters worse, if that was at all possible, he'd thought to sidestep the storm of disapproval, so they'd just leave him

alone and let him get back to his precious painting, by introducing her—more than once—as his "model".

His fucking model!

But she'd never said a word. Giving him that line about wanting a "normal life". And after leaving a few messages on her answering machine, instead of chasing after her, he'd let her go, because *he* was hurt that *she'd* leave him.

Christ, he was a bastard. A stupid fucking bastard. How could he have done that to the woman he loved? No wonder she'd left. It was a miracle she'd even spoken to him the other night. He would have kicked his ass out the door before he got his mouth open.

But maybe, just maybe, he had one more chance with her. That kiss had been better than a memory. She still felt something for him. And this time, please God, this time, he'd make sure he did it right.

Chapter Three

Hitching her backpack a little higher to take the strain off her shoulders, Elizabeth slammed the boot shut on her old Beetle, glancing around the deserted parking lot next to the nondescript old brick warehouse with the fading paint.

"Sweet Lizzy Burnett. Well, I'd just about given up hope of seein' you here again, lass."

At the familiar voice, Elizabeth smiled broadly and turned toward the huge double doors, currently splayed wide open.

"Hello, Sara." She held her arms open for a hug from the tiny, gray-haired woman, inhaling the wonderful fragrance of Sara's signature lavender blend.

For years, Sara had rented a portion of the bottom floor of Tom's converted warehouse for her small aromatherapy business. She paid a pittance for the space, but Tom had always maintained he kept the rent minimal just because he loved the way she made the place smell, and she was a cheap guard for his private lift during the daylight hours. As far as Elizabeth knew, the only person who had a key to the building, apart from Tom and Sara, was Richard. Anyone else had to run the gantlet of the formidable lady in front or her.

Tom wasn't fooling anyone though—he really loved the old lady who treated him like a grandson. For Sara's seventieth birthday he'd presented her with a beautiful portrait of herself. Elizabeth remembered him working for weeks to get it just right. A lot of love had gone into that painting and it showed. And while it usually took a fair bit to render old Sara speechless, he'd managed it—she'd sputtered and stuttered until he picked her up and gave her a big hug.

So many wonderful memories, Elizabeth mused. "So, you haven't retired yet?" she teased Sara.

"And do what? Sit at home and watch the TV with our George? The man sleeps through more shows than he watches. Besides, the old dear is deaf as a post. The volume damn near blasts me out of me chair."

The air was richly laced with a surprisingly harmonious mix of spicy and floral scents. Elizabeth sniffed as she looked around. "I've missed this, Sara, walking in here and feeling as if I just tumbled into a wild country garden."

Sara stood back with her arms crossed and gave Elizabeth a considering look. "Well, you've been missed too, lass. And by more than me." Sara raised her eyes to the upper floor. "Hasn't been the same since you left. Damn near become a hermit." Then she brightened. "But now that you're back—"

"Oh no, Sara," Elizabeth interrupted. "You misunderstand. I'm only here for two weeks."

Sara's mouth firmed, her fists planted on her hips. "You're kiddin' me! Why, I've never seen two people more—"

Elizabeth kissed her cheek to stop the emotional outpouring of words, patting Sara's hand as she pulled back. "We two just weren't meant to be."

"Poppycock. And you know it. And so does his lordship up there." She jerked a thumb in the direction of Tom's loft. "Stupid man. But then they're all a bit daft. God didn't put women here to keep men company—it was so there'd be someone around with a brain and a bit of bleedin' commonsense to run things."

Sara looked at her closely, gripping Elizabeth's hand firmly with both of hers. "Listen to an old woman, luv." Sara's voice gentled, the scratchiness of age apparent when she wasn't doing her usual shouting. "What you two shared isn't gifted to many—don't throw it away."

"It's too late—"

"Bah! It's never too late, lass. Not even when you're as old as me." Sara turned away and walked to her workbench. "Go on upstairs, lass. He's probably been pacing all morning waiting for you to get here."

"I'll see you later, Sara."

"Oh, you can count on it." Sara chuckled to herself, her shoulders shaking. "Just don't forget to invite me to the wedding," she tossed over her shoulder.

Elizabeth shook her head and couldn't resist a grin at the irrepressible old romantic. She pressed the button on the old lift. It slowly shuddered and groaned its way down to her, and she stepped inside, dragging the outer wrought iron door closed then turned the lever for the loft.

Memories hit her thick and fast as the lift rose. The familiar smell of turpentine and oil paints. The annoying creaking of the old service lift. Tom bringing her home from dinner at the small pub on the corner and taking her against the wall, ripping clothes open—his, hers—just enough to get skin to skin and his cock inside her, neither of them able to hold off the hunger and wait until they got upstairs...

Leaning her forehead against the wall, she closed her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath. God, she had to stop. *It's just a job. It's just a job.* She repeated the mantra she'd been telling herself for the past week, whenever the memories started to creep in and overwhelm her.

As the lift slowed, she forced a smile on her face, mentally steeling herself for the impact of seeing him again.

Still, nothing could quite prepare her for the sight that greeted her when the lift stopped and the door opened into Tom's living room.

Tom. Paint-flecked jeans. Bare, muscled chest. A faint smile on his face and a palette in one hand as he held his other out to her. Damn.

"Hello, sweetheart. Welcome home."

From the fleeting flicker of sadness in Elizabeth's eyes as the words fell from his lips, Tom could have kicked himself. Shit! Richard was right—he truly sucked. But

seeing her standing there, smiling at him, the sense of déjà vu had hit him right between the eyeballs, and the last two years had evaporated as if they'd never been.

"Sorry. I shouldn't...what I meant...I mean, what I was going to say..."

She stepped into the expansive room, brushing past him to wriggle her backpack off. He plonked his palette down on the console table and rushed to help her. The darn thing was nearly as big as she was, and she sighed and rotated her shoulders with relief when the weight was gone.

She turned to face him with a nervous smile. "Tom, it's all right." She looked around the foyer, the smile fading. "It does seem just like yesterday, doesn't it? And I know you didn't mean anything by it." Still, her gaze jumped around nervously while managing to avoid his face altogether, then her arms crossed over her chest so that she was almost hugging herself. She looked up at him. "The guest room's still the guest room?"

"Sure. Has its own bathroom now, too. So you can freshen up or...or whatever."

A cheeky but still nervous smile, a hint of the old Elizabeth, peeked out. "Oh, pooh! And there I had visions of stretching out in the Jacuzzi..."

So he wasn't the only one. Except he'd been indulging in memories of her in there with him every time he'd used it for the last two years. Naked. While he fucked her slowly, repeatedly, making her come again and again until she screamed his name and begged him to stop.

His cock stiffened in his jeans, pinching against the cold metal teeth of the zipper so that he flinched. His reassuring smile probably came out looking more like a grimace. "Well, if you want to. I mean...I meant..." He coughed in embarrassment. "God, I need to stop saying that. Look, if you want to use the tub, Elizabeth, feel free. Lock the door if it makes you feel better." He gritted his teeth and turned to walk away before he looked like a bigger idiot. A hand on his arm stopped him.

"Tom?"

He turned and looked at Elizabeth, surprised to see, not disgust or anger, but instead understanding. The hand on his arm gave a reassuring squeeze.

"This isn't going to be easy for either of us, Tom, I can see that. But this won't work if you keep worrying about what to say or what to do. So for the next two weeks, let's just try and be old friends. Sound okay to you?"

Old friends. Sure. Maybe. Not.

Still, it was better than nothing. Hell, he appreciated the fact that Elizabeth was being so generous, especially considering the way he'd treated her before. He covered her hand with his, feeling a slight tremble under his palm. "Sure, Elizabeth. And thanks."

"That's okay, I just want that tub later," she laughed, the sound still a little nervous. "Let me go unpack and take a shower for now. Then you can tell me what you want me to do."

She picked up her backpack and spun away before he could say a word. Just as well. He doubted she'd like to hear what he *really* wanted her to do.

Naked.

On the couch.

No, on his lap on the couch.

On his cock on his lap on the couch.

He closed his eyes and groaned, gripping the edge of the table.

Her sliding up and down, eyes locked with his as he cupped her breasts and made love to her slowly, relishing every second of being inside her. Her juices running down his straining cock, dampening his balls when he began to move faster. Elizabeth moaning, her pussy clenching around him as he fucked her, gripping him, milking him...

Ah hell!

He looked down and noticed he'd been rubbing his cock through his jeans. God, next thing he'd have it in his hand, pumping it.

Before Elizabeth could return, he ducked into his own bathroom, almost ripping the zipper off his jeans to free the aching, rigid flesh, shucking the jeans in quick movements.

Yanking open the glass door of his shower, he flicked the lever, cold water blasting out, and stood underneath it, eyes closed, shivering while he willed his erection to just die, for God's sake.

* * * * *

The main living area was empty when Elizabeth walked out of the guest room. The shower had done wonders and she felt ready to tackle Tom again. Subtle spices teased her nose, the mix a tantalizing blend of something Asian. Her mouth watered to thoughts of Tom's special Thai stir-fry... But before she could head in the direction of the kitchen to find out, she was distracted by the setting Tom had prepared for the painting.

A decadent, plush, red velvet couch, wide, with scrolled, padded arms and finely carved feet, set off by the lustrous sheen of a creamy satin backdrop threaded with gold. A six-foot butterfly palm stood sentinel over the tableau, the rich green and yellow fronds offering a striking contrast to the richness of the deep ruby red and gold-shot cream.

How the hell she'd missed it earlier... She'd passed Tom's studio part of the loft to get to the guest room, but the sight of a shirtless Tom had always had the ability to make certain parts of her brain short-circuit. Some things never changed.

Catching movement out of the corner of her eye, she turned to see Tom leaning against the wall watching her, arms crossed over a now-covered chest, the thin white T-shirt stretched taut, showing the toned pecs and hint of dark chest hair, jeans-clad legs

lazily crossed at the ankles. God, he was gorgeous. Tall, dark and handsome just didn't do him justice. Her pulse sped up just looking at him.

His hair was damp too, the rich dark brown waves slicked back off his forehead. From the looks of it, she wasn't the only one who'd taken a quick shower. An image of him naked, water sluicing down that hard, muscled body, the hair-covered chest leading down to tight abs, the dark trail of hair arrowing down to the nest of dark curls that surrounded the thickest, most delicious—

Realizing where her eyes had landed, she blinked and looked away, embarrassed at the direction of her eyes and her thoughts, and nodded at the setting. "That's beautiful, Tom. What an amazing couch. Plenty of room for two." Her eyes widened. "I mean, Richard and me. He and I... Posing. Later." She rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean. It's nice, anyway. Wonderful ambience." She tugged on the end of the knotted tie of her robe. "I hope this is what you wanted—the robe. I thought you'd rather get started straightaway since we don't have much time."

His expression hardened, his jawline tense. "Actually, I thought you might like to eat first. It's nearly dinnertime. Aren't you hungry?"

"I guess. Normally I don't eat until about nine, when I remember. Just before the rush hits at the club. Some nights I don't..." She looked down at her robe, suddenly feeling a little too casual. "Give me a sec and I'll go get changed."

"No need." He turned and walked away. "Come on through. It's ready. We can eat in front of the fire."

Grasping the lapels of her robe together, she swallowed down her misgivings and followed him through the gothic wooden hallway doors to the open-plan living room. Nothing had changed, she realized as she looked around. The large antique stone fireplace was blazing merrily, surrounded by the same comfortable leather lounge suite offset by the richly colored Persian rug.

"Here. Take this and go get comfy."

She turned at the hand on her elbow and took the glass of red wine he offered her. She closed her eyes and sniffed, a smile spreading across her face as the fruity bouquet teased her senses.

Nestling into a corner of the large lounge, she took a sip of her wine before placing it on the coffee table, looking up in time to see Tom standing to the side of her with two large noodle bowls in his hands, fragrant steam wafting up to make her tummy rumble in anticipation.

"Hmmm," she said, inhaling as she took the bowl. "Your cooking skills haven't diminished, I see."

"Limited cooking skills." His mouth kicked up at the corner in a self-conscious grin.

"My repertoire is still limited to one dish."

"Yes, but it's a very, very good dish," she encouraged, inhaling briefly before she began to twist the noodles around her fork, her mouth watering in anticipation.

He sat on the floor in front of the fire, leaning up against the lounge beside her with his legs stretched out in front of him, bare feet pointing toward the fire.

It didn't matter that he'd put on a T-shirt. Even his broad, long feet were sexy as hell. She looked down at her bowl instead, trying to concentrate on the food.

As she ate, and they talked, she tried to remember the last time she'd spent a night like this—just relaxing in front of a fire, glass of wine, wonderful food... She couldn't remember a single one. Not since she'd bought the club. And until now, she hadn't stopped long enough to remember what she'd been missing.

Debbie was right—she needed to get back to a more normal life. The emptiness of her current one was glaringly obvious.

"Let me take that."

She was pulled out of her thoughts, not even aware she'd wandered off mentally until she realized Tom was standing in front of her reaching for her bowl.

"Thanks. It was delicious."

"My pleasure," he said, and walked to the kitchen. She picked up her glass and finished off the last mouthful of wine, then lay back and sighed. Food. Wine. A flickering fire. It was heaven. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of total relaxation.

The couch dipped a little as Tom sat beside her on the edge of the sofa and she hummed when his fingers pushed the hair back off her forehead and then began to slowly stroke. She exhaled with the pleasure the sensation brought. Nobody had cared for her like this for a long time, not since... She mentally shook off the thought. Tonight she just wanted to enjoy. "I always loved it when you did that."

"I know."

She wanted to open her eyes, but she was just too comfortable, the sensation too relaxing. "Hmmm, that feels so good."

"You look beautiful lying there like that, Elizabeth. Would you mind if I sketch you?"

"Does it involve me moving? Do you need me naked?"

He chuckled, the sound warm and rich. "Talk about loaded questions. Would I be munching on my testicles for a week if I answered yes and yes?"

She laughed softly, opening one eyelid to peer up at him before turning on the sofa and pushing the cushion under her head. "Bad man. Tonight you're safe—only because you wined and dined me. Am I all right like this?" she asked, yawning.

"Stay just as you are, sweetheart. You're perfect."

A pair of warm lips pressed a kiss to her forehead, and she smiled, her eyes still closed. "Good, I don't think I could move right now if you paid me to."

The seat dipped again as he stood, and she listened as his footsteps padded away.

It wasn't easy, finding his "zone" with an almost naked Elizabeth stretched out in front of him and a painfully hard erection to contend with, but eventually he did. He'd been sketching for an hour before it penetrated that Elizabeth had fallen asleep. The soft snores brought an affectionate smile to his face. She must have been tired. But then with the crazy hours she worked, it wasn't surprising.

The only problem was, he now needed the robe off, but didn't want to wake her. And he didn't want to wait. Knowing Elizabeth, she could sleep for hours.

Bending over her, he loosened the tie, although the knot gave him some trouble at first. As it released, he breathed a sigh of relief. Slowly, so as not to disturb her, he eased the two halves of the gown apart.

His heart started to pound, his fingers tightening on the silky fabric as her body was revealed. Christ, she was beautiful. How the hell had he let her get away from him?

Because he was a stupid fuckwit.

Turning on his heel, he continued remonstrating with himself while he picked up his pad again and tried to get comfortable in his favorite chair.

With quick, deft strokes, he began to draw. But following the gentle curve of her neck, the way her jaw led to a slightly pointy chin—her "stubborn" chin she used to call it—reminded him of the days and nights he'd spent drawing her before. The pert nose, the soft curve of her mouth, even when she was asleep.

All so achingly familiar.

When his gaze tracked lower, over the feminine little bump of her collarbone, before the first gentle swell of her breasts, he had to grit his teeth to stop his hand from shaking.

Her large nipples were flat, the dark pink circles begging for his tongue to tease them to hardness. His jaw clenched.

A series of sure strokes filled in the shape.

He quickly shifted his eyes to the noticeable ridges of her rib cage, a slight frown forming a crease between his brows. She'd lost weight. Elizabeth had always been

curvy, nicely covered so that bones didn't stick out. As an artist, it was one of the things he'd found so attractive about her.

But then his personal preference was for curves. Lush, shapely, like Elizabeth. He loved running his hands over her body and feeling the flesh give underneath, molding around him, cushioning his hardness, softening as she relaxed against him.

Tracing the flare of her hips, he noticed her tummy was still more rounded than flat. He loved the soft swell. To him it was one of the feminine things about her—a hard, flat abdomen on a woman was about as sexy as an ingrown toenail. How many nights after they'd made love had he curled around her, legs entwined, as he caressed and stroked it? Maybe he was weird, but to his mind, if he wanted to fuck a hard muscled body with a six-pack of abs, he might as well fuck a guy. For just a moment, the thought came to mind of her tummy swelling in another way—fuller, the skin stretched over the tiny babe she carried. Thoughts of taking her, making love to her as he ran his hands over the proof of their love...their child. The surge of possessiveness, of almost primal protectiveness that powered through him took him by surprise. He blinked his eyes and the image shattered.

Gripping the pencil a little harder, he tracked lower, aware for the first time that the crinkly black hairs previously gracing her plump mound were almost gone. In their place a thin strip that led between her closed legs. Led to paradise.

Christ! The pencil snapped in his hand. When had that happened? And for whom? Jealousy surged through him. He should have questioned Richard more closely about her "love life" when he had the chance. But then it was ridiculous for him to think that a woman like Elizabeth wouldn't be pursued by men. She'd probably been beating them off with a stick, while he'd been sitting around sulking like an adolescent with a chip on his shoulder.

She moved, tilting her upper body a little so that she lay partly on her back. He groaned softly as the puffed lips of her mostly bare pussy became more visible. His mouth watered to taste her, to run his tongue up the pink slit and lick until she came.

He dropped lower in his seat. Damn, his cock was so hard the constriction of his jeans was killing him. Two years of celibacy were now having disastrous effects on his body. He definitely had another appointment with his shower gel. Just as soon as he finished...

Dropping the now useless remnants of his pencil, he picked up another, sketching quickly to finish the drawing. He really needed to cover her up again.

Then another cold shower.

Placing his pad on the floor, he stood to lean over her, intending to pull the robe closed, when she moved. And stretched.

He froze, his hands suspended over her. Breath stopped as he waited for her to open her eyes.

Part of him wanted her to. Wanted her to watch as he leaned down to tongue her nipples into hard peaks.

But she didn't. Instead he looked down at her arms now lying back over her head, her breasts pulled up, the firm curves tempting him so much that he had to swallow before he drooled all over her.

Kneeling on the floor beside her, he lowered his head, his eyes fastened on the tempting flesh of the dusky areola. His tongue flicked out, tracing a damp line around the edge, the circles growing smaller and smaller until he rimmed the tip. He paused, exhaling warm breaths over the dampened flesh, inhaling the sweet scent of Elizabeth—a muted hint of jasmine, so definably her that his cock pounded in response.

Eyes fastened on her sweet face, he opened his lips over the beaded tip of her nipple, sucking gently. He bit back a groan when the nub hardened, lengthening under his lips. She moaned in her sleep, her body moving, her back arching slightly as if searching for more.

"Tom..." Her whispered plea nearly made his heart stop. He searched her face, still rubbing the hard nipple over his tongue, expecting her to open her eyes. At this point

he didn't care. He wanted her so much. Could she possibly be dreaming about him? Not some other guy, but him?

"More, Tom. More..." Her voice petered away on a soft little moan as he surrendered and flicked the tip with his tongue then took a little more, tugging a little harder as she began to writhe beneath him. Switching sides, he tended to the other nipple, lapping at the sweetness of her skin, drinking in the music of her breathy sighs and pleas. Her nipples had always been her most sensitive spot—she could orgasm from him sucking on them alone—and he loved them.

When he heard her breathing accelerate, quick little puffs of air passing her lips, he pulled back, looking down at her, feeling the hunger for her that had never been far away, gnawing at him. All it took was a thought of her... The robe was now fully parted, showing every inch of silky skin.

A glance at the bared flesh of her labia showed the faint glisten of her juices on the dark pink lips. The musky scent of her arousal wafted up to him, pulling him closer until his mouth was over her delicious pussy and his tongue was swiping a slow line through the silky skin of her folds.

Fuck! He closed his eyes, the taste of her spilling over his tongue. Her legs parted as he looked at her delicious cunt, and he breathed deeply. God, this was heaven.

Moving to the end of the couch, he positioned himself between her legs, taking care not to disturb her.

Letting his arms bear the weight, he positioned himself above her, leaning down to lick her again, running his tongue over the velvety smoothness of her smooth labia. So soft, so sweet. Nectar. Ambrosia.

Plump, swollen, the flushed lips made him ache to work his cock inside her. But not now. From the sounds leaving her mouth, the excited shivers over her skin, she needed this. And he couldn't deny her. Would never deny her again.

His tongue slid inside the sweet slit, and he couldn't stop the hum that rumbled out of his chest. Keeping his eyes on Elizabeth's face, he licked, sucked, lapped and nibbled until her hips arched off the sofa, closer to his mouth, nudging against his lips, telling him of her need for more.

He lifted his face, slowly easing a single finger between the slick folds, moving it back and forward, gritting his teeth at the way her muscles gripped him. But he knew when he'd found her sweet spot. Her body began to move, just small undulations, in time with the rubbing of his finger, continuous little pants leaving her lips.

She was close. It struck him just how well he knew her body—the signs, the sounds, the way she started to clench and release on him when she was about to come. As he inserted another finger, the lips of her pussy parted, revealing the swollen nub of her clit.

His face positioned over her again, he flicked and licked the sensitive little button, feeling her body begin to shudder under his mouth and fingers, the wetness building, making his fingers slick with her juices.

Wrapping his lips around her clit, he sucked, not hard, but enough to push her over the edge, and her body stiffened before twitching in time with her contractions as he continued to thrust gently. Gradually the spasming around his fingers eased and she lay still, her breathing slowly returning to normal.

His body ached with the need to move over her and slide his aching cock inside her sweet hole, feel her sheath swallow him up until he was buried up to her womb.

But if he didn't move away now, he'd be inside her and pounding away before he could stop himself.

With trembling hands, he pulled the edges of her robe together, gritting his teeth as a hand brushed against her breast, his palm curving around the silky mound for one brief, exquisite moment before tying the belt loosely, his hands fumbling over the knot. Her body shifted, the movement slight, almost imperceptible, and he stroked her forehead, smoothing over the skin with butterfly-light touches, knowing how it calmed her.

"Shhh, sleep, Elizabeth," he whispered at her ear, his tone soothing, gentle.

Grabbing the afghan off the back of the lounge, he draped it over her, tucking it in at the sides before leaning down to place a kiss on her forehead.

"Love you, sweetheart."

He straightened and stepped back. After one final lingering glance, he turned and left the room.

As his bedroom door clicked closed behind him, Elizabeth's eyes blinked open and she drew in a deep shuddering breath, exhaling a single word, filled with pain and longing. "Tom..." Her arms lowered, her fingers clutching the blanket, as a single tear, followed by another and then another, tracked down the side of her cheek, slipping off her face to dampen the lock of hair beneath.

With the back of her hand, she brushed the trail of wetness from her cheeks. Her mind was confused, her jumbled emotions taking much longer to settle than her body. She knew better than anyone what a tender, giving lover Tom could be, but what had just occurred... There had been no artifice, no power, no advantage to be gained from it. Behind the gentle caring, she had sensed his need for her, and even without his final whispered words, the love communicated in the gentleness of his caresses.

It was that same need for him, for his touch, that had made her continue to feign sleep. With the first stroke of his fingers, she had awoken from the light sleep she'd drifted into. But with her eyes closed, she could pretend nothing had changed, and the dreamlike moment wouldn't be shattered.

She loved him—still. It was something she had never denied—not to herself, anyway. But could things be different between them? Could their two worlds ever meet, or would the same conflicts drive them apart again? And would she be able to survive the heartbreak again if it did?

* * * * *

The warm sunlight on her face roused Elizabeth and she sat up, rubbing her eyes as she tossed off the afghan blanket Tom had covered her with the night before. As she swung her legs off the lounge, her sleepy gaze landed on the folded note on the coffee table. She fingered the note, thinking about the previous night. Wondering what the day would hold. With a shake of her head, she pushed the thought away. Time would tell. She opened the note to discover Tom had gone for a jog, and for her to help herself to whatever she wanted.

Well, what she wanted was a nice, long, hot shower. Feeling the chill in the air, she dressed comfortably in a pair of sweatpants and a thick, wooly jumper, pulling on a thick pair of socks to keep her feet warm on the polished wood floors.

Hunger wasn't an issue, since she rarely ate breakfast at the club, so instead she grabbed a cup of black coffee from the coffeepot keeping warm on the kitchen counter. The rich scent of Tom's personal blend teased her senses, and that first sip made her hum with delight. There was nothing in the world quite like a good cup of coffee.

Not knowing how long Tom would be gone, since she had no idea when he'd actually left, she wandered around the loft, noticing how little had changed since she'd been away. She was on her way up to the garden seat on the roof when she paused before the staircase, noticing the open door to the smaller room that had originally been intended as a spare bedroom, but had long been Tom's storeroom for his completed or semi-completed paintings.

Curiosity ate at her. Refusing to consider it snooping, an innate inquisitiveness to see what he had worked on during her absence had her feet moving into the dark, shuttered room. A quick tug on the cord, and the wooden slat blinds opened to flood the room with daylight.

Knowing Tom's preference for grouping his paintings in chronological order, she started with the rack furthest from the door, recognizing, as she flicked through the first few, paintings he had completed prior to their original introduction.

The next two racks held those he had undertaken while she lived with him. It was like plunging into the past, to a happier time, his choice of colors rich, vibrant—happy colors. Particular favorites of hers were the ones with children—he loved to capture their *joie de vivre*, that playful curiosity or impish mischievousness. In complete contrast were the ones he'd done of her—richly colored, highly sensual, whether whimsical poses or those charged with erotic nuance. Even though she recalled posing for every single one, it was, as always, disconcerting seeing herself through his eyes. The woman in the paintings was so different from the one she faced in the mirror—more earthy, seductive—he even made her look beautiful.

However, it was the final two racks that held the most interest for her. She paused a moment with her hand on the first painting, almost reticent, now that she was here, to pull it back and see what it held. What had inspired him? Or more importantly, who? That thought had trepidation skittering through her, her heart rate pounding, her breathing picking up as an uncomfortable rush of adrenaline flooded her system. Who had replaced her? Which woman had been responsible for firing his passion for his art? Elizabeth felt a stab of unreasonable jealousy at whoever had taken her place—she had left Tom, after all, not the other way around.

But from her own experience with Tom, she knew better than anyone how he unleashed the passion he poured into his erotic paintings. She couldn't count the days or nights he had made love to her, bringing her to orgasm, over and over, only to carry her sated body through to his studio, placing her on his soft old couch to slumber or watch as he attacked his canvas with single-minded focus, waking her hours later as he carried her into bed and wrapped himself around her before total exhaustion took him and he slept soundly.

Did she really want to see? Whatever or whoever had been his "inspiration" once she left? She knew it would be like gazing into a part of his soul—a part she hadn't been a part of.

Her hand tightened on the wooden mount. Taking a deep breath, she made her decision.

Pulling it toward her, she looked down at a painting of a woman. The background was muted in shades of gray, the mood one of sadness, despair. Rather than a full figure, it was a portrait, the woman partially turned away, looking back over her shoulder. But it was the expression on her face—the pain, the hurt almost tangible so that she reached without thinking to touch her, wanting to soothe the pain she knew she was feeling. She knew that pain, that despair. It mirrored her own the day she had walked away from Tom.

It was, in fact, her.

The thought that he had painted her rocked her. But to have captured so accurately what she'd been feeling... So much of that day was now a blur, details muffled by the emotional devastation of leaving him. But consumed by her own pain, she'd been unable to contemplate the aftermath for Tom. Now she knew. He'd dealt with it the only way he knew how.

With a distracted movement, she brushed at the tear that had wound its way down her cheek, breathing deeply to stem the imminent flood of more.

Steeling herself, she flicked through the others, painting after painting. A dozen or more.

Her. With one or two exceptions, they were all of her.

As with the first one, he had chosen key moments in their lives together. And she recognized every single one—the happy ones, the quiet ones, those moments where they were so deeply in love that nothing and no one else mattered.

They had each dealt with the separation in different ways. And while she had never been able to let go of her feelings for him, quite possibly it had been the same for Tom. Maybe he did still love her after all.

So where did that leave them now?

She turned and left the room, snapping the blind shut and plunging the room once more into darkness. As she walked up the staircase and stood up on the roof, looking over the sooty London skyline, feeling the wind buffet her, the brisk chill of the breeze clearing the emotional miasma of the past from her head and thrusting her back into the present, she pondered what to do.

She could wait for Tom to make a move. If he loved her as he'd said, and wanted her back, then he had to be prepared to face what had forced them apart. It would require him putting her first, even before his art, to resolve the issues with his family. Could he do it? Was it, as before, asking more of him than he could give?

Or... A thought occurred to her and a small smile tipped her lips as she raised the mug and took a long sip of coffee. Perhaps Tom's motivation for action lay with another member of his family.

Richard. In a few days he'd be back. And knowing Richard as she did, it was highly unlikely he'd behave once they were both naked—especially with Tom watching. The only other time she and Richard had posed together had nearly driven Tom over the edge watching Richard's hands wandering all over her body, ostensibly trying to "get comfortable". Until "getting comfortable" had involved a hand cupping one of her breasts. That would have been more than enough for Tom, until Richard had begun to "innocently" fondle her nipple. In less than an hour, the sitting had been over, Richard was bundled into the lift, and Tom had been fucking her with a frenzy on the rug in the living room, where he'd tackled her as she ran away from him after teasing him about the erection he'd developed watching them.

Maybe she wouldn't have to do a thing...

Chapter Four

Good Lord! thought Richard. The two of them were worse than a couple of teenagers. Sneaking longing glances at each other when they thought the other one wasn't looking. And the sexual tension... Hell, it had been so thick since he arrived, it was nearly choking him. Whatever had happened before he got there, it sure as hell wasn't what he'd hoped would happen once they had a bit of time alone together. Elizabeth wasn't saying, even when he managed to get her alone, for the short spells when Tom finally left her for ten minutes while he showered. And Tom... He was strung tighter than a drum.

Still, something had happened. Something they obviously hadn't talked about, judging from the little pantomime being played out in front of him. Although, from the way Tom hovered over her constantly, finding any excuse to touch her, however innocently, he was at least moving in the right direction.

But time was running out for them. In a few days, as per her contract, Elizabeth would be back at her club and Tom would be alone once more, head stuck in a canvas while the love of his life walked out that door—for the second time.

For a guy who wasn't backward in coming forward about taking what he wanted from life, Tom had royally screwed up with Elizabeth from the word "go".

But not this time. On that point Richard was determined. Not if he had anything to say—or do—about it.

He flicked a glance between the two of them. Tom's butt was perched on his stool, long legs stretched out in front, as he fiddled with his pencils again on the round table beside him. Tension, anger, stress, whatever—he always fiddled with those damned pencils. Sharpening them, lining them up, sorting them...

Normally it drove him nuts, but this time he at least knew the reason.

Elizabeth was another matter. He couldn't quite work out what was going on in that mischievous mind of hers. She was nervous about something—he just couldn't figure out what. And as if the drink of water she'd just grabbed from the kitchen was going to help quiet those jumpy little nerves he could see written all over her face. Richard smiled to himself.

It was time for Elizabeth to get naked.

For Elizabeth and him to get naked.

Together.

Where good old Tom could watch. Jealous as hell that it wasn't him on the lounge with Elizabeth.

And Richard intended for him to get an eyeful.

He planned to ratchet up that jealousy until it jerked Tom out of that damn stasis he was in regarding Elizabeth and into some positive action.

Reclining back on the armrest, fingers linked behind his head, he looked at the two of them and rolled his eyes. It was pretty damn obvious, to him at least, that they both wanted nothing more than to fuck like bunnies until they blew each other's brains out. However neither one seemed prepared to make the first move.

So, that left him—good old Richard. If he didn't love them both so much, he'd walk out now and leave them to it. But no, if two people were meant to be together, it was these two. And he would do his darnedest to help. Besides, he was really going to enjoy this.

Standing up, he flicked the studs on his jeans, turning away as he bent over and shucked them down his legs, off his feet, tossing them onto the floor out of the way.

As he straightened he caught a glimpse of Elizabeth's wide eyes at his choice of underwear, quietly amused by the nervous little glances she threw from his butt to Tom.

And Tom. Hell, he could give that moody geezer from *Pride and Prejudice* lessons in brooding. Well, not for much longer...

Slowly, dragging it out for maximum effect, he slid his underpants down his legs, watching Elizabeth closely as he gave a little wiggle for effect. A smirk tipped his lips when she rolled her eyes at him. Gee, and that was the thanks he got for putting on his silky black G-string just for her. With a flick and a grin, he kicked it to land on his jeans.

"Ready, sweet pea?" Richard said to Elizabeth and winked, earning him a muttered, exasperated "Rich-ard!" Grasping her shoulders, he steered her backward until she reached the velvet lounge, pushing her down until her bottom touched the seat. "Now you just lie back and let me do all the work, okay?" He sat down beside her.

"Richard, I don't think—"

"Good," he said, cutting her off as he eased her head back onto the tasseled pillow.

"That's your biggest problem right there—thinking."

He caught her widened eyes looking down between their bodies at his growing erection. Even he was surprised—and delighted—by the display. Talk about running up the flagpole. "Now, don't worry about ol' Willy there. He's got a mind of his own, and besides, no man with a pulse could be in the position I'm in and not get a hard-on, love. Anyway, I'm sure Tom will draw me to be a pencil-dick or something in retaliation for putting my hands on you."

Richard grinned as she chuckled, and brushed the vagrant strands of hair back from her face. "It's only good old Richard. So just relax and trust me, okay?" She nodded. "That's the way."

He turned to Tom, seeing the warning darkness in his eyes, the rigid set of his jaw, his fingers gripping the pencil until the knuckles whitened. From the looks of that thunderous expression, a few molars were going to be sacrificed before Richard was done. Tom really needed to let go of some of that pressure. Learn how to vent. All that "stiff upper lip" crap would just give him an ulcer.

"We'll try a few poses, Tom. You just sketch away and let us know when we hit one that does it for you. Okay?" Richard knew damn well none of this was "okay" with Tom, since it involved any man but Tom being naked with his woman, but that was his tough luck.

Without waiting for an answer, Richard turned back to Elizabeth. *Poses. Right.* He doubted Tom would be drawing too much very shortly anyway... "Now, Elizabeth my lovely, what say you and I get nice and cozy?"

Positioning Elizabeth so that she was comfortable—arms draped loosely over her head, legs extended but slightly spread, one knee bent—Richard waited until she had settled against the tasseled cushions, lying back in sybaritic splendor. God, what a delicious sight!

Then, locking her gaze with his, he reached for the tie of her silky robe, slowly working the knot free. For a brief moment, she tensed, her eyes startled.

"Come now, love," Richard whispered, seeking to settle her, "this isn't the first time we've done this. Though I daresay after today's little effort it will be the last." He winked at her, her eyes going wide until she got his meaning. Or *thought* she got his meaning. If she had any idea what he had planned, she'd likely knee him in the balls. Regardless, he felt his cock harden further with the sensual, slumberous look that came over her eyes.

He had modeled with Elizabeth once before for Tom. Two years ago. A couple of hours of having her luscious bod reclining back against his chest, bare as the day she was born. Even though it had been Tom's suggestion, he had been so pissed off at seeing her wrapped up in Richard's arms, he'd finished the sketches in just over an hour.

But Richard had always had a soft spot for her. She had a fresh, open way of looking at life that just made a person feel good about themselves. In fact, the only thing that had kept him from stepping in when his fool cousin let Elizabeth go was the knowledge that some day it would come to this. Or he would have snapped her up the second she walked out on Tom.

"Don't move." Keeping his touch gentle, his movements slow, he reached for the robe. The fabric could easily have slipped open on its own, but instead he parted it, ensuring the slippery fabric teased her nipples on the way before he released it.

He was rewarded by a soft indrawn breath. Moving to his hands and knees, he leaned over her, watching her eyes almost cross as he drew closer.

He placed a soft kiss on her lips, noting how warm, how soft they felt under his before he nibbled along her jawline to her ear. Down lower, his cock hardened further and he could only imagine the view Tom must be getting.

"Watch Tom, love, and don't take your eyes off him," he whispered in her ear. He pulled back a little, noticing she watched him still. "You know I love you, sweet pea, and I won't hurt you. But trust me and keep your eyes on Tom. No matter what I do," he whispered for her ears only.

Her eyes swung back to Tom. He couldn't see him, but he could guess what he looked like, judging from the slight elevation of Elizabeth's breathing.

Lapping his tongue along the velvety skin of her neck, down over the gentle swell of a full breast, he licked up the underside, closing his eyes briefly at the sweet smell of her skin. A soft, ultrafeminine scent... Whatever it was, it was Elizabeth all over—warm, sexy, delicious.

Giving himself over to the enjoyment that awaited him for as long as he had, he ran the fingers of a hand up her side, noting how soft, how sensually rich her skin felt, before finally cupping the relaxed swell of a breast, massaging it in his palm. Closing his lips over the other nub, now tight and puckered, he sucked, light tugs, closing his eyes and moaning softly as he enjoyed the taste, the texture as it rolled over his tongue.

What had happened?

As instructed, Elizabeth watched Tom. Trying unsuccessfully to block the sensations that shot through her body like lightning with every tug, every nip of the sensitive tip under Richard's lips.

But Tom... The second Richard moved over her, a change had come over him. Jaw clenched. Body tense. Eyes, the blue so dark as to be almost black, swirling with hunger. A wild, possessive hunger.

But more than that, need. The same tale of insatiable need she imagined her own told.

Richard shifted. Moving. Rimming the other nipple before nipping it sharply. And on her indrawn gasp, the jerk of her body, Tom jerked too. Her eyes floated lower, unable to miss the strain caused by the swelling in his jeans.

Good, he was turned on. Annoyed as hell. Furious, judging from his expression. But turned on to see what Richard was doing. To her.

Her breath caught as Richard sucked harder and she began to pant, trying to draw more oxygen into her lungs.

Tom's sketchpad dropped to the floor, her body jumping in response to the sharpness of the noise as it hit the parquetry floor.

Richard shifted again. Lower, his wicked tongue flicking a damp trail down her ribs, tracing each line until she arched against his mouth, trails of goose bumps following in the wake of his lips.

God, how much more could she take—could Tom take? His breathing was deeper, harsher, his eyes blazing fire at her. And still, no words came from his lips.

When Richard left the dip of her belly button, the rasp of his chin leading the way over delicate flesh, gentle hands parting her thighs further, she tensed, knowing what would come.

And that first breath, that initial brush of his tongue, so hot, down the damp folds of her sex, had her arching up, a shuddering groan releasing as she let free the breath she'd been holding.

The pencil in Tom's fingers snapped, a piece of it flying across the room.

And as Richard's tongue took a long, slow swipe, her eyelids fluttered shut, unable to stand the torment, the undeniable, torturous pleasure of feeling one man pleasure her while the man she loved watched.

It was an escape, shutting them out to submit to the sensations.

Her surrender.

"Eyes open, Elizabeth! Dammit!"

Startled out of her sensuous torpor, she blinked. Tom now stood, staring at them intently, ferociously. Lust and desire etched into every line of his body. He had always been the sexually dominant one in their relationship. It was one of the things that made her so hot. And now it looked like her hungry tiger was back.

"Watch me, baby." Tom's eyes darkened, his nostrils flaring as he stepped closer and caught her scent. Her clit tingled, sending the juices flowing at the commanding tone of his voice, confirmed by the moan as Richard lapped faster, pushed deeper at her sex. "He told you that, didn't he? Knew how fucking crazy it would make me, seeing another man touch you, lick you, kiss that sweet cunt that's mine. So you watch me, Elizabeth, and see what it's fucking doing to me."

In spite of the darting thrusts of Richard's tongue inside her, she watched, her eyes wide, as Tom slid open the zipper on his jeans, and his cock, hard, thick, already weeping from the small slit, fell out into his palm.

A small, hungry whimper left her lips as he began to stroke. From root to tip, the movement slow, the grip firm. As he watched her.

Christ! Tom had never seen anything as beautiful as Elizabeth. Right then. Her face flushed, the rosy color traveling down her neck, over the delicious mounds of her breasts. The rich brown strands of hair flowing around her head like ripples of silk. He could spend a lifetime trying and never capture the many facets that made up Elizabeth's beauty.

Full breasts wobbling as her chest rose and fell as she panted, short, sharp little breaths puffing through the teeth biting into her bottom lip as her excitement escalated.

A few times when they were younger, he and Richard had shared a woman. But that was different. He hadn't been in love with any of them. And though one side of him wanted to kill Richard for doing this, for touching her like he was, some twisted part of him wanted to see Elizabeth's pleasure as another man took her. But with her eyes only on him.

That was the key. That acknowledgment that her pleasure came from and through him. He needed that. And more. He needed all of her. Needed everything she had to give.

Stripping quickly, he felt satisfaction flare inside him as her eyes grew heavy-lidded, the long lashes fluttering once or twice as her gaze landed on his cock. Licking her lips and leaving a glistening, tantalizing swipe across the reddened, swollen flesh.

Moving closer, a step, two. Until the scent of her arousal filtered up to him, torturing him, the familiar fragrance weakening him so that he had to lock his knees.

Her skin glistened now with a light sheen, continuous little panting moans coming from deep inside her chest that shredded his control.

Richard raised his head, his lips shiny from Elizabeth's pussy, his eyes dark and impatient, his eyebrow raised in an unspoken dare.

Jaw clenched, Tom nodded. Watched a moment longer as Richard slipped a finger inside the tight sheath. Then withdrew, working two fingers back inside before lowering his head again to flick at Elizabeth's clit.

Her hips lifted, pushing up against Richard's mouth and fingers.

Tom began to stroke his cock again. "You thinking of me, baby? Wishing it was me?"

"Please," she panted. "Please, Tom."

He grasped his cock hard at the base, waiting until the warning throb eased off. "Shhh, baby. We'll take care of you." He reached a hand down to caress and cup the side of her face. "You want this, sweetheart?" Still stroking the hot cock in his hands, he inclined his head at it, waiting for her answer.

Biting her lip, she nodded.

"Not good enough, sweetheart. I need to hear the words. Give me the words, baby."

Before she could speak, a ragged moan was torn from her as Richard reached deep inside her, his fingers thrusting faster. "I want... I want... Tom, please. Give it to me."

Christ, he couldn't wait any longer himself. Straddling the arm of the lounge, he cupped her face in his hands. "Open up those sweet lips, baby. That's it." He gritted his teeth against the shocking intensity of that first heated touch. "Take me. Take all of me." Sinking with slow thrusts into the delicious warmth. Her lips tightening around the aching flesh as her tongue flicked the underneath.

His knees swayed. Hell, she had the most magic mouth. Always had.

"Now, suck it. Come on, hard, sweetheart. I need it so fucking hard." As he began to fuck her, those lips stretched around the thickness of his shaft, her moans of pleasure vibrated along the length of his dick. More than sexual hunger ate at him, and words he'd sworn he'd never say to another woman after she left him, leaving his life empty, his heart devastated, escaped from his traitorous lips. "I need *you*, baby," he whispered. "Oh fuck, I need you so much."

Fiery lances of sensation shot up his legs, down his spine, the overload of stimulation centering in the tight sac between his legs. Panting, he shut his eyes, shaking his head to flick off the sweat that threatened to blind him. He opened them

with a snap when he felt her hands on his butt, kneading the taut flesh, fingers trailing down the crevice teasingly to push against the tightness of his asshole.

"Enough!" he grunted.

Freeing his grip on her face, Tom grasped her hands and pulled them away, backing up so that his cock slipped free of her mouth, the bobbing, pulsing length shiny and wet.

"Richard," he gritted out. "I take it you're prepared?"

A devilish grin creased his cousin's lips. "Like a Boy Scout."

"Move. Come around behind me."

Alone on the lounge, Elizabeth half sat, her body trembling, the arms that supported her shaking noticeably. She hadn't come. Richard wouldn't have let her, but damn if she didn't look ready to explode. Tom knew his Elizabeth, intimately familiar with every signal her body put out. He reached down to stroke her cheek, his thumb wiping over her bottom lip so that it pouted at him. "This is what you want, sweetheart? Because if you do, I really want to give it to you."

She nodded. "Yes. Yes, both of you."

He bent and kissed her, hard. Thrusting his tongue inside her mouth as she arched up to him, her arms looping around his neck, holding him tight.

Lips still joined, he lay down on the lounge, pulling Elizabeth with him so that she lay over him. The wetness flowed from her pussy, the heat scorching his cock. And he had yet to get inside her. She was going to set his cock on fire.

With a final lick over her lip, he eased back from the kiss, pure satisfaction surging through him at her sexy, disheveled appearance above him.

"Hands on my shoulders, sweetheart," Tom said softly. "Brace yourself."

Her eyes were so deep, the blue so clear he could drown in them. His heart beat harder as he looked at her, seeing her eyes go glassy, one single tear welling up to topple over the lid and slide down her cheek.

"I need you too, Tom. Fuck me. Please, God, fuck me."

"Oh sweetheart, I'll give you whatever you need. Always." He moved her hips, lifting and positioning her until the head of his cock was kissing the lips of her vagina. The second she felt the tip at her opening, she rocked her hips, a grunt leaving his chest as half his length was swallowed up in the searing heat.

"Oh sweetheart, God, you feel like heaven." She was tight around him, the muscles inside flushed with blood, making the channel narrow. He gripped her hips harder to stop her from hurting herself as she tried to push down on him. "Slowly...that's it...yes, there's no rush, baby..." Her inner muscles tightened around him, nearly cutting off the circulation in his cock. "Ease up, sweetheart. Loosen those muscles so I can move, okay?" He sighed when she relaxed slightly, allowing him to work deeper until he was fully seated. He heard the crinkle of foil, caught Richard's eye over Elizabeth's shoulder. Sweat broke out on his brow as she rubbed her pelvis against his, seeking stimulation for her clit.

Her movements stilled, her eyes going wide as she felt Richard move in behind her and touch her.

"Just relax, love," Richard said as he nuzzled her ear, his lubricated finger easing inside the tight hole. Sliding in and out, relaxing the muscles, accustoming them to his touch, to the feel of being penetrated anally.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you look to us, that gorgeous body just waiting for the pleasure we can give it?" He turned her head to kiss her, her lips swollen, her tongue searching for his hungrily.

A second finger joined the first, sliding easily now as she surrendered to the sensation, rocking slowly on Tom's cock, pushing back onto Richard's fingers. He broke the kiss, panting against her neck. "And it will be pleasure, love. So much pleasure...for all of us."

"You talk...too much...Richard," she gasped as Richard withdrew his fingers and lined up his cock at the pouting little hole. "Been telling you that for *years*!" Her voice rose on the final syllable as he nudged and pushed past the tight ring of muscles until just the head was crowned. Her ass clenched on him so that he couldn't move and Richard gritted his teeth against the exquisite shafts of pleasure that raced up his cock.

"Oh my God!" she panted.

Richard's grip tightened on her hips in direct relation to the gripping around his cock. "Fuck, Tom, she's choking me." And she was, but along with the tightness was the most indescribable warmth and tantalizing friction that shot straight to his balls.

"Come here, sweetheart." Tom eased Elizabeth closer to him, holding her face while he bussed his lips over hers. Whatever Tom was doing worked, because Richard felt the relaxation spread through her body, the clenching grip on his cock easing so he could slide more freely. A sigh of relief left his lips.

Three more slow and easy thrusts and he was buried inside her, his groin rubbing against the warm cheeks of her ass. He leaned back and skimmed his hands over the rounded globes. "Tom...hell, Elizabeth has the most fucking beautiful ass." He glanced over Elizabeth's shoulder, catching Tom's eye, seeing the strain his cousin was feeling to not move before she was ready for them.

A nod passed between them. In tandem they began to move, timing their thrusts so that as one pulled out, the other plunged in. Over and over, the sounds of their bodies joining, the hungry sucking noises as Elizabeth's cunt swallowed Tom's cock each time, feeling the vibration and rub of Tom's cock against the ultrathin wall separating them.

And Elizabeth... Her moans, her broken, stuttered pleas as she lay between them, unable to move, only able to feel, to enjoy, her cries to them, begging, pleading to let her come.

Hell, he hoped it happened soon. He wasn't sure how much longer he could last.

Reaching up, running his hands up over the soft skin of her back and around to her breasts, Richard palmed them briefly, before rolling the nipples in his fingers, pinching them hard, feeling the jerk shoot through her body in response to the small bite of pain.

He tensed, gritting his teeth, his body rigid as she tried to take control and pushed back against him on the down stroke, an impatient "More!" forced from her lips as she gasped underneath him, her body shaking as the first tremors of her orgasm began to tear through her, building, her body jerking between them.

And then she was there, a keening wail of pleasure piercing the air as her channel and her ass muscles clamped around them. The pinching, clenching of her ass ripped Richard's control away. Going deep once more and tensing, holding it, he reared back, holding himself flush against her buttocks, his fingers tightening on her hips as his cock exploded inside her, pumping and pulsing in an endless stream until he was drained, shaking from the power of his release. The tip of Tom's cock rubbed against his through the thin barrier as he, too, thrust deep and tensed, roaring as he blasted deep inside her cunt.

Exhausted, Elizabeth had already collapsed onto Tom's chest, draped over him, gasping for breath. *Christ al-bloody-mighty!* Richard knew how she felt. Panting, he held himself above her, his rigid arms shaking as they kept him suspended until he felt able to withdraw, holding the condom tight to the base of his cock as his rapidly softening erection slipped free.

A shaky step back from the lounge, and Richard looked down at the two of them. Elizabeth was still collapsed over Tom's chest. Tom's arms now wrapped tight around her, holding her close as he murmured to her.

A look passed between Richard and his cousin as they both glanced at the woman they had shared, but, Richard knew, never would again.

With a wry smile, he picked up his clothes and stumbled into Tom's bathroom for a shower.

When he returned fifteen minutes later, hair still dripping, he noticed that Elizabeth had moved, now lying beside Tom on the lounge, eyes closed, her breathing returned to normal as she snuggled in close. Tom stroking her hair as his chin rested on her head.

With a parting glance at the two of them, he opened the door to the lift and left, a tired but satisfied smile creasing his face.

Chapter Five

Elizabeth came awake to the feel of cool sheets beneath her and a warm body surrounding her like a blanket. They were in Tom's room, on his huge king-sized futon. Richard was gone. Through the skylight, she could see that night had fallen.

Behind her, an erection prodded at her backside.

"Feel like a bath?"

"Hmmm," she murmured, her body feeling deliciously satiated, "but I'd have to move."

"I could carry you..."

"Or..." She lifted her leg over his so that his cock slipped along the crease of her buttocks, nudging at the lips of her pussy. She shifted slightly to get a better position. "We could just stay here, and you could—"

She bit down on a moan as she felt him fill her from behind. "Definitely just stay here," she gasped as he began to rock inside her.

One hand began to caress her nipple, the other one moving between her legs to rub soft circles around her clit, the arc of tingling fire shooting along every nerve ending between her nipple and the ultrasensitive bud at the top of her slit.

His lips nuzzled at her neck, nipping a path to her ear.

"I love you. I've never stopped loving you, sweetheart," he moaned against the shell of her ear.

As the slow orgasm built between them, she leaned back against him, resting her head in the crook of his shoulder and closed her eyes as a single tear leaked between her lashes and skidded down her cheek. "And I love you, Tom," she whispered, her

breath catching as the gentle tremors peaked and passed between them, his arms tightening around her as they rode out the gentle release.

A few minutes later he still hadn't eased his hold on her—she could feel the tension in his body, and turned in his arms. The look on his face was serious—his "thinking" face.

She ran her fingers over his brow, smoothing the lines away. "Hey, what's up?"

He grasped her fingers and kissed the tips, then held her hand against his chest so that she could feel the beat of his heart.

"I'm just wondering if you can ever forgive me...enough to give me—us—another chance."

Could she? In spite of what had gone before, she could tell this was a different Tom. He'd changed, matured. For that matter, she admitted, they both had. And while putting her heart on the line again was a risk, was the alternative—life without him—any better? It had been a bleak, lonely couple of years. There had been no other men—how could there be when she'd never stopped loving him? And now, lying in the shelter of his arms, knowing he still loved her, going back to being alone seemed even darker than before. For the first time in two years she felt warm again, happy. Content in a way that went soul deep. "It won't be easy, Tom. We need to talk about things this time—as equals. But we could try."

He buried his head in her shoulder, a long shuddering breath warming her neck. "God, I've missed you, sweetheart. So much. Trust me, it will be different this time. I promise you that."

As he hugged her tight against him, she felt hope. For the first time in two years, the future seemed brighter.

* * * * *

Singing in time with the music blaring from the radio, Elizabeth turned the gas flame off, and lifted the last two slices of French toast out of the pan, sliding them onto a plate to keep warm in the oven.

God, she felt great. As though she were surrounded by a big bubble of happiness. And if Tom didn't hurry up and get out of the shower, she'd say to hell with the French toast and go join him.

As she closed the oven door, the intercom phone rang on the wall beside the refrigerator, and Elizabeth stepped over to answer it, knowing it could only be one person. "Sara?"

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"Yes, lass. It's me."
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"What's wrong?"

"Just a warning," Sara said in a rush. "You have compan—"

The rest of Sara's words were drowned out.

"What is the meaning of this? And who the dickens are you?"

Surprised at the snappish female voice behind her, Elizabeth spun around. A tall, elegant woman, dressed in clothes that Elizabeth estimated at a glance represented at least a month's wages to most people, stood glowering at her, her eyes widening briefly before narrowing as recognition followed. "You! What are *you* doing here?"

Wonderful. Tom's mother Caroline. Just what she needed. Elizabeth quickly said her thanks to Sara and hung up the phone.

"Hello, Lady Danville. It's been such a long time." Not quite long enough though...

"Elizabeth." The way Caroline said her name, that affected upper-class drawl with a barely hidden sneer, always managed to make her feel like a peasant. Obviously Caroline's disposition toward her and the "risk" she potentially posed to her darling son hooking up with one of the bevy of debutantes she kept pushing his way, hadn't improved any. Even if Caroline had only believed she was Tom's model, her opinion

that her darling son could do better was one she'd had little compunction in voicing, even in front of Elizabeth.

But she was not going to let it get her down. Not today.

"Take a seat. I'll let Tom know you're here."

She escaped to Tom's bedroom, glad to see him coming out of the bathroom, showered. Entertaining Caroline was the last thing on earth she wanted to do. Tom's mother she may be, but the woman was a dragon. A dragon with pearls and a twinset. She'd only met Caroline half a dozen times, and that was six times too many.

"Your mother is here. I better go shower and get dressed. I'm sure she was less than impressed to see me waltzing around your kitchen in my robe."

"I don't care what she thinks, Elizabeth." He reached for her, wrapping his arms around her waist. "And you're not getting away from me without a good morning kiss." His eyes held hers a moment, an odd look in them before he lowered his head until their mouths met, taking his time to kiss her thoroughly before he released her.

She reached up for another quick one before she let him go. "Hmmm, I like your good morning kisses."

His eyes turned devilish. "Stand there much longer looking at me like that and you'll get a lot more than just a kiss, sweetheart."

She laughed softly and turned away, warmth filling her. "You can't. Mom's waiting, remember?" she said, rolling her eyes at him before she scampered away, giggling as a hand swatted at her bottom.

"Don't remind me. Now scoot. Before I forget about my mother and fuck that saucy little ass you keep teasing me with."

She peeked out the door to make sure Caroline wasn't around before she ducked around the corner into the guest room.

* * * * *

Taking as long as she dared, Elizabeth turned off the shower, toweling the excess water from her hair before running a comb through it and leaving the steamy bathroom.

Opting for a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, not wishing to aggravate Caroline any more than necessary by swanning around in her robe, she took one final look at herself in the mirror before she planted a smile on her face and walked out of her room.

She refused to let Caroline spoil her happy mood. Tom loved her. He hadn't stopped loving her, and she loved him.

They were both older now. Wiser. They could work out their problems.

They could work out any —

She stopped as she rounded the corner to the kitchen. Tom's words halting her in her tracks.

"...and I don't care what you think it looks like, Mother. Elizabeth is my model..."

Pain hit Elizabeth like a sledgehammer. Memories of that day two years ago. The words the same. The situation a mirror of the day he'd denied her, denied them, and broken her heart.

Her fragile little bubble of happiness popped as she saw Tom looking at her, a pained expression on his face.

No, not again. No! She couldn't stand it. Her breath locked in her throat and she tried to tell her feet to move. To get out of there. He was going to do it again, and she didn't think her heart could take it twice.

Tears filled her eyes, the pounding in her ears blocking out whatever Caroline was saying. She could see Tom's mouth moving as he watched her, but no sound was getting through.

And she didn't want to hear. She didn't want to know.

All she wanted was to leave. Run.

But Tom was walking toward her. His dark eyes holding hers, his expression angry.

Finally getting her feet to move, she took a step back as he reached for her. But his hold on her wrist was firm, halting her escape.

"Elizabeth. Don't." Though his expression was dark and she could feel the anger pouring out of him, his words were surprisingly gentle. "Come here, sweetheart."

She shook her head frantically. Why? she wanted to ask. So you can destroy me again?

As he pulled her against him, his head lowered until his lips brushed against hers, and she closed her eyes as a couple of tears breached the lids, followed by another and another.

And then he straightened, still holding her, and faced his mother.

"The family, the great Danville line," he said mockingly, "can all go get stuffed, Mother."

Elizabeth flinched at Caroline's shuddering indrawn gasp, the look of pure venom on his mother's face as she locked onto her.

"Along with all those vapid, dimwitted, supposedly 'suitable' young ladies you keep throwing at me," Tom continued.

A finger under Elizabeth's chin turned her face until she could look at him, see the smile in his eyes as he looked down at her.

"I'm marrying Elizabeth, if she'll have me after the total bastard I've been to her."

"But you can't!" insisted Caroline in the background. "When your father goes, you'll inherit the title. You'll be Lord Danville." Her tone turned cajoling. "You need someone who will be an asset to you, darling, who can help you, who knows how to act, how to dress..." She looked down her nose at Elizabeth and her tone sharpened. "Not some...some cheap—"

"Enough!" Tom's roar was so loud it made Elizabeth jerk in his arms. "Don't you ever, *ever*, dare speak to or about Elizabeth that way," he growled.

"But-"

"What I need," he bit out, cutting his mother off as he continued to glare at her, "is someone who loves me. *Me*, plain old Tom. Not the heir to the fucking Danville fortune."

"Thomas!" Caroline gasped in shock.

"I *need*," he gritted out, trying to bring his anger under control, "the woman I love, Mother. The woman I've always loved. And if you and the family don't like it, you can go and get f—"

Elizabeth reached up quickly to cover his mouth with her fingertips, stopping him from committing a bigger sin than he already had. He looked down at her and she smiled up at him. "I've told you before about saying that, Tom. Besides, I think that's enough bad language out of you for one day," she said and winked. "And yes," she said softly, "I'll marry you."

"Thank heavens for that."

"You'll be sorry, Thomas. Mark my words, this girl will bring you nothing but grief."

Without taking his eyes from Elizabeth, he answered Caroline. "No, Mother, that's where you're dead wrong." He smiled at Elizabeth, the unmistakable sight of his love for her shining in his eyes, making her heart flutter. "She'll bring me nothing but happiness."

He kept holding her until they heard the lift door slam shut as Caroline stormed out, then kissed her. A slow, heady kiss. Lingering. Gentle. Dancing over her lips, his touch so tender, so full of love, it made her heart clench.

"You're sure, Tom?" she asked moments later when the need for air forced them apart. "I don't want you to be sorry later."

"The only thing I'm sorry about, sweetheart, is that I didn't tell her—and you—two years ago." He kissed her again. "And I don't ever want to see that hurt look in your eyes again, knowing that I put it there. I love you, Elizabeth. And I will always love you."

* * * * *

"So...about these paintings..." Elizabeth asked later as she lay back in the Jacuzzi while Tom sat opposite her, massaging her feet.

"Hmmm? What about them?" With a devilish look, he lifted one foot to nibble on a toe, the tickling causing Elizabeth to giggle and squirm.

"They're not finished, Tom."

"No. Are you suggesting we do that now?" He ran his hand from her foot up her inner leg, teasing the lips of her pussy so that she was soon squirming for an entirely different reason. "I was really hoping we could find something just as...creative, to amuse ourselves. I'm feeling particularly inspired right now..."

"Do you think we should get Richard back to pose some more?" she asked innocently.

Tom's fingers stopped and looked over at Elizabeth.

"No. I don't," he replied, his words slow and distinct.

"But I'm sure there are a few poses we haven't tr—"

Elizabeth's words were cut off as a sharp tug on her feet pulled her under the bubbling water.

As Tom grasped her around the waist, she came up spluttering and laughing, water dripping from her lashes, her waist-length hair streaming behind her to float in the water. He pulled her flush up against him.

"Minx."

"But darling..." she teased.

"Trust me, I've seen enough of Richard's bare butt to last me a lifetime. I'll do the rest from memory."

"And what about me?" She leaned toward him to kiss him, draping her arms around his neck as she floated fully onto his lap, straddling his thighs. She gasped as he

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thrust up and slid his now erect cock inside her waiting channel. Small grunts of pleasure left her lips as he began to stroke. "Do I...get drawn from...memory too?"

"Sweetheart, I've been drawing you from memory every day for two years. Never, ever again. Besides..." He nibbled a line along her neck, making her wriggle with the pleasure streaking through her. "I have a special idea for a portrait of the future Lady Danville to hang in the family gallery. I was thinking a lovely nude..."

"Tom!"

"Hmmm?"

"You wouldn't!"

"Um-hmmm."

About the Author

One thing Susie Charles could never say is that her life has been boring. Having lived in more places than she can remember and tried enough different occupations to fill a job guide, has given her a wealth of experiences to draw upon in her stories.

Now, as a writer of erotic romances, she works diligently to live up to her lusty image. Always looking for inspiration wherever she can find it, she has a disconcerting habit of checking out the "talent" when she goes shopping with her adult daughters—although, for them, she draws the line at whistling at strange men. She spends her spare time walking along the beach where she lives, ostensibly exercising while she plans new stories, but more often than not visually distracted by the delicious abundance of almost naked male flesh she uses as "inspiration".

Needless to say, with her boundless and undiminished appreciation for the male of the species, her heroes are always hunky sex gods who will do *anything* to make their lady happy. Being of the curvy variety herself and knowing how most males just love curves, her heroines are never model-thin, and are fun, sassy and intelligent to boot.

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